SLASHDOG - Dog God of the Fallen Volume 01

He didn't know whether it was a dream or a vision. But, it was a memory he firmly clung to.

It was during his childhood——having just finished seven hours in elementary school, he had traveled to some ruins in the neighboring town to play as he pretended to have adventures.

Under the winter sky of January, when the snow had scarcely started to accumulate, that person appeared in front of his eyes.

——It was a black angel.

The man had black wings growing on his back. The black winged angel appeared to be about his father's age, or perhaps slightly older.

The angel man stooped down so that they were both at eye level and said.

"…..Well then, is it possible you haven't realized it?"

Patting his head, the man put on a smile.

"If so, if it dwells within you, then your world will completely change sooner or later. But, now, now, you shouldn't despair? After all, you—"

Placing a finger on his chest, he said:

"From among the thirteen types, yours alone is crowned 'God'. Although, it is a false 'God'—"

He often could not understand what the man was talking about. He couldn't understand—but the memory remained vivid.

At that moment he responded to the voice of the friend he'd come exploring with who had been calling out to him, and when faced the man's direction again—it was too late as the black angel was no longer there.

He didn't know whether it was a dream or a vision.

Prologue

Early May—

During high school——no, right before the one and only, once in a lifetime school trip of high school, Ikuse Tobio was necessarily absent.

Yesterday, his physical condition had been poor. He had a fever that would not go down and his body was devoid of strength. His head was in a daze, and he was also unsteady on his feet.

Although it was the beginning of Golden Week, this was no reason to be careless….he was still afflicted with the sudden illness. The doctor had also prescribed that he rest.

"So then, since I'll be buying souvenirs, you're going to obediently lie down?"

Saying so while standing smiling at the front door was a semi-longhaired girl. She's a classmate of Tobio in the second year of the same high school. She's also his childhood friend, Toujou Sae. Her smile was mischievous.

"…Aah."

Tobio responded while pouting through the mask.

She had come to check on Tobio's condition prior to departing. From Tobio's perspective, there was no choice but to disagreeable.

The itinerary of the trip was a period of ten days on luxury liner cruise touring the Hawaiian Islands.

For Tobio, it was supposed to be his first trip overseas. As a student at the time, there was no way he wouldn't have enjoyed it. With how very heavy his body felt, he was quite bitter.

Sae poked Tobio's forehead which had displayed a sullen look.

"I can go anytime once we become adults. Then we'll go together, so please try to endure this time."

"……How stupid. I want to go today. And anyways, you say you'll accompany me, but you're just going to have me treat you, right?"

"You got me."

Sae laughed and chuckled. Tobio exhaled, rubbing his poked forehead.

After she finished teasing Tobio, Sae picked up her bag.

"Well it's about time, I'm sorry to say."

"Ah, wait a minute."

Tobio calls Sae back as he reaches into his pants pocket, and takes out a string of beads.

He places it on Sae's left wrist.

"My late Baa-chan[1], she'd always make sure I'd wear this when I travelled. Since I'm unable to go, I'd like you to take it and be protected on the trip."

Sae looks at the beads, and thankfully rubbed them with her hand.

"Thank you."

"Um….that's, how I should put it, I want you to take care of yourself."

Saying so, Tobio's face, already red with fever, got even redder.

"What?"

"Uh…….you know diseases and such, viruses and such."

[1] grandmother

“That’s probably what you have.”

Receiving such a sarcastic reply, Tobio’s mouth bent into the shape of “へ” under the mask.

As she opened the front door, Sae took one final look back to say.

“I’ll be going now.”

She gave a slightly lonely smile, and departed.

Four days after his fellow students had left——.

They had travelled by airplane from Narita to Honolulu. From there, they boarded the “Heavenly of Aloha” at the harbor, and by now it should be the arriving at the Hawaiian Island of Kauai.

To imagine his fellow students smacking their lips after partaking of the luxury liner’s cuisine, touring each and every island, and thoroughly enjoying the cultural exchange was likely to make his feel bitter.

With his physical condition having recovered little by little by late morning, Tobio was preparing for brunch.

Tobio does not remember his parents’ faces.

By the time he was physically and psychologically aware, his parents were gone, and thus, until junior high school, he had been brought up by his grandmother. His grandmother had also died around the time he became a junior high school student. Since then, he had been living on nothing but the inheritance his parents and grandmother had left behind. Due to the maid acquainted with his grandmother had been asked to assist in his daily life, it was possible for a high school student to purchase all the necessities without any particular inconvenience.

Tentatively, he had no memory of any relatives or guardians——someone who could have become his protector, so there wasn’t anyone to contact, and so it was that he had come to lay hand to the inheritance.

Therefore, after becoming a high school student, he now lives alone a one room flat. It was relief for him that Sae would come over to make dinner.

Though even without going as far to have someone prepare meal and the like that morning, Tobio did make fried eggs, which he began to eat along with some bread.

His fellow students would probably have already finished eating an elegant breakfast. Thinking like that, his breakfast seems sorrowful.

He moved to the TV, and while gazing at it in a daze, he nibbled at his bread.

'The search is still ongoing in the case of the missing persons——'

Tobio gnawed silently at the bread while watching the TV without any particular interest.

'Students and teacher of Ryoukuu High School while on a school trip had safely boarded——'

What……?

Tobio heard the name of a familiar high school, suddenly gluing his attention to the TV.

The TV was showing a maritime video that was taken from the air. As if out of a movie, there was the majority of a luxury liner's hull sinking into the sea while giving off smoke.

He wondered if he could not have misheard something. This should be impossible! Extraordinary things such as this, they're not supposed to happen to you!

Tobio's heart was repeatedly attacked as the brutally ruthless TV's subtitles displayed "Mysterious shipwreck of the Heavenly of Aloha".

With the name of passenger ship confirmed, Tobio opened his eyes wide in shock. A chill travelled down his spine. He began breathing violently and his heart rate accelerated, and he noticed his heart pounding.

Tobio checked the information on the Web through his cell phone.

He checked the news written in one article. Its contents made Tobio's body quiver.

'Luxury Liner, Marine Accident!'

'Nightmare on the School Trip!'

'Status of the 233 high school students on board unknown——'

'Hopeless for missing persons——'

The name of the high school, Ryoukuu High School——.

And Tobio, thought of his childhood friend Sae who he'd gone through high school with.

—— I'll be going now.

Within Tobio, the last words said by his childhood friend reemerges. Sae, who had given him that slightly lonely looking look while smiling. ……There was something about that combination that signified how hopeless things were.

"……Sae."

Completely drained, Tobio sat down right where he was.

That day, Ikuse Tobio lost 233 of his fellow students, including his childhood friend Toujou Sae——.

Chapter 1 – Return/Attack

Part 1

July. The time when the heat was becoming increasingly earnest——.

Ikuse Tobio and a friend were on the train returning from school—— they were paging through magazines near the door.

"As I thought, the suspension of this one might be better."

"If that's the case, then wouldn't it have been quicker to have gathered stuff at the junkyard near the riverbank?"

To Tobio's opinion, his friend sighed with half-open eyes.

"Foolish. Saying such things, someone who doesn't understand things like picking your own motorcycle parts shouldn't have been out riding one. If they're shitty, then wouldn't that create a possibility of suffering severe punishment in a car accident? As 'spected, it's certain that, by having saved purchasing money to install brand new parts, doesn't that make it all more romantic?!"

His friend spoke passionately, his eyes sparkling.

Recently, he seemed crazy about motorcycles, and in order to complete it he was gleefully working part time despite the school prohibition.

Incidentally, obtaining a general motorcycle license at his and Tobio's school is also a school rule violation. If one is found out, getting suspended immediately was unavoidable.

However, it's the second year of high school. It's said that boys that age by nature have an interest in bikes and cars.

"Tobio's should also get his license. The two of us could go touring! It would absolutely be fun!"

Recently, he had been frequently inviting Tobio to do so.

Tobio was not at all without interest. But……

“Ooh, that doesn’t sound bad…….But I’m not really in the mood.”

Tobio replied, smiling wryly.

“I see, it’s not easy to forget……”

His friend abruptly looked down at the floor of the car.

‘Still unexplained! Sinking accident of the Heavenly of Aloha issue. The case that casts a shadow on the United States’

Even as Tobio looks at it, a small shadow appears on his face.

Two months ago, Tobio was in the midst of that incident.

The sinking of the luxury liner that carried 233 of his fellow students. As a survivor of the incident, Tobio was chased everyday by the media.

Such is to be expected. If a ship carrying Japanese high school students caught fire in a marine accident, it’s a big news story. It was top news at any station on a daily basis, with the media showing no regard while interviewing the survivors of the incident, as well as officials.

A joint funeral for the deceased classmates, was carried out amid such an uproar. Tobio, who was attending as one of the surviving, was quite the newsflash during the funeral.

Several students other than Tobio who also survived were in no state to attend school for a while.

They were subjected to curious and also accusatory gazes but, even more so, there was a serious problem.

There would suddenly be no classmates who, until recently, had all been so lively. As many teachers were also lost in the accident, there weren’t many people at school who could offer consolation. That incident, given how public it was, meant time was needed to organize and accept such thoughts in one’s mind. The students who were left behind, being

hunted by the press, had little choice but to stay home until the excitement over the incident died down.

“From that incident, isn’t it strange that they never found people who lived through it?”

To his friend’s question, Tobio lowered his gaze.

“Aah, only those who did not participate in the school trip survived. ……Among us, there is less than ten altogether, myself included.”

Those who had survived from the same school year as Tobio, they were all limited to students who had not been able to attend the school trip as well. Among both the students who attended as well as the teachers, there were no survivors.

When the ship broke in half, one side had sunk to the sea floor, while the other half continued to be searched. From here, the bodies of a few of the teachers were recovered, the only bodies that were found from those aboard. From that search, the corpses of students were not once found to be intact. The search proceeded to try and salvage the remains that had sunk to the ocean floor, but the sunken ship had ended up in an unexpectedly tight crevice, from which raising it was extremely difficult. As of now, there was no set prospect of recovering them.

Those on TV proposed a variety of theories for the sinking accident, while suspicious gossip was circulated about what the true inside story was. Every day there’s a shady commentator saying, ‘The cause is a secret weapon of a neighboring country!’ or ‘Supernatural phenomenon!’, ‘It’s the work of UFO!’ and the like, but all that talk just seems foolish.

——It’s because the cause of the sinking accident is still unknown.

Dubious theories are just a means of going with the flow while not facing reality.

However, the Japanese easily grew tired of the subject. Without any progress in the case, by the time a month had passed coverage of

political corruption became the main issue, while news of the sinking accident gradually was treated as less newsworthy.

Maybe the bereaved families of the students not making any fuss is to blame. Although initially voices were raised saying “take a stand!” and such, little by little it became an issue they didn’t want to face.

By that time, those that had survived along with Tobio had each decided which school that had accepted them they would be attending. Among them, not one chose to continue attending Ryoukuu High School after all that they’d been through. Every one of his fellow student was no longer attending school there.

Thus the surviving students all scattered, fleeing from the media reporters as well as their previous neighbors from when they attended that first school, who had also watched them with unrestrained curiosity.

“That time crazy things were happening. Because of the mass media cameras every day was crowded in front of the main gate.”

As his friend recalled the scene, Tobio wore a bitter expression.

As his friend has said, he’d been asked to comment every day in school but none of them were used.

Initially treating him like he was hurt, but also giving him troublesome looks, he barely spoke to the students he encountered, and finally was granted some peace.

Early summer——as it entered July, the time of the incident was no longer talked about, his unease turned to composure, and he was able to calm down in his own way. And so for the first time he was able to deeply feel the loss of his classmates.

“Well, these thoughts must be painful, so isn’t better that that you devote yourself to adapting to this new life? Thinking about such unpleasant things, that certainly harmful to your mind and body.”

Hitting him on the back, his friend gives him words of encouragement. Tobio was thankful and obediently followed these words.

In the meantime, the train had arrived at the station where his friend gets off.

“Ah, well I’m getting off here. One more thing. Don’t worry and cheer up.”

He gets off the train and shows a guts pose to Tobio with a smile. Tobio gives a short reply of, “Ah, see you,” and shook his hand.

“…….”

Tobio remained alone in the car and exhaled.

Sorry——.

Tobio in his heart, apologized to his friend.

Between the new friends, a deep gap still exists. A gap that still did not feel filled.

While being jolted in the train, Tobio was gazing at the sky.

When he is alone, he has more time stare at something in a daze like this.

Suddenly taking out his cell phone, Tobio lowers his gaze to the mail screen. The majority of his inbox was used for preservation, to keep the past from disappearing.

The address, that of the friends who died in the accident. The mail was sent from them up until the day of the accident. While riding alone on the train, checking the mail has become a daily routine. Every time he sees the e-mail, the face of a classmate floated in his mind, causing him loneliness while providing a feeling of nostalgia. It is not possible to send replies to the mail, it’s simply accumulated. But even if they can’t send mail, it’s Tobio’s only point of contact with them.

And so he will continue to check them, as his finger stops on one of the e-mails. The sender, Sae——Toujou Sae. The girl who was Tobio's childhood friend.

'Boarding the airplane now. Looking forward to some comfortable air travel. See you later. And make sure you're properly resting!'

E-mail that would have been sent from the airport. This was it, the last contact from her.

His new life had begun, the life he had become accustomed to, where Tobio, when he was alone, would often cry in his room. Because he would suddenly be attacked by a great sense of loss.

Lunch break, the upsurge of stupid topics on the roof, spending time with noisy friends at karaoke and game centers after leaving school, the day-to-day memories.

Sae who had gone to highschool with him——. Since they lived nearby it was a common occurrence. She would always show him her unforgettable smile.

——That everyday occurrence is gone.

On the day she left for the school trip, Sae's appeared to have such a lonely look as she left ——.

He'll never again be able to hear the reason for such a face.

Something important had been lost forever. Something that Tobio cannot recover.

Tobio, rather than getting off at the station he would usually, got off two stations early.

He could stop by the bookstore, kill some time in the game center.

Alone, returning to that large apartment, he would just think about his classmates more than during the day. Once such thoughts started in his

head, they would persistently fill his mind until he left home the next day.

The sense of loss would violently corrode his mind.

So, as much as possible, he'd browse the bookstore, enjoy games at the game center. Only by doing so would the pain be alleviated.

6 p.m. passed, 7 o'clock arrived. The sun remained out for a long time in the summer, and so was still out as late as 7 o'clock.

Tobio, having lost the fighting game he was playing after reaching the final boss battle, while sighing decided to return home. At this time, the street was sparsely populated with people like office workers that just finished work. Tobio was walking with hollow eyes.

It was when he got to the crosswalk. Suddenly looking at the sidewalk across the street, Tobio's vacant eyes spotted something. Instantly, his eyes opened as wide as they could.

——Sae.

What he was currently seeing, it was a figure that was supposed to be impossible. Seeing such a thing, Tobio heart started beating violently.

They had a relationship where each had watched the other's growth from an early age. There's no way he could be mistaken.

Before he could try to reach out, the pedestrian signal turned red. As one might expect, those people leaving work became like a wall, with no way to proceed.

Quickly change to green! Sae is……,Sae is right there!

As Tobio watched, several men and women gather around Sae. Watching, Tobio was further startled.

Among the faces, one was a good friend from his class; that was the figure of Sasaki Kouta.

Sasaki was talking at length with Sae. And then, the group that includes Sasaki and Sae walked off to someplace.

I have to rush forward! But, the signal still hasn't changed.

He realizes Sae's group will cross with the alternating signal. When the signal changed, the group that was walking was just barely still in sight. Wading through the crowd, Tobio started running.

She was alive——.

He did not yet know that the person was indeed her. It might be an illusion formed by his own desires.

But, her dead body had not been recovered from the sea. Corpses had not been found.

They might not necessarily be dead. There were 200 or more of them, so it shouldn't be strange even if a few people drifted and ended up somewhere on the island! His lack of composure, his mind spinning due to the illusion caused him to think so.

Tobio crazily chased after the group.

As the sun went down, the color of dusk deepened.

Tobio was breathing heavily, as he chased the group. However, being caught by a signal again a few minutes ago, he had lost sight of where the group had gone.

Little by little, he proceeded to walk towards unpopulated streets.

As he advanced down the dimly lit road, the street became very quiet. At that moment, he spotted a figure enter a construction site area at the extremes of his vision.

He gave chase, reaching the front of the building under construction. It was a scene for the construction of a condominium. The entrance to the construction site was strangely open, making it easy to gain entrance.

Tobio, confirming that no one was looking, stepped into the site. He proceeded to enter the site filled with steel and wood.

Since the light from the electric lamps wasn't meant to reach here, and because of the darkening sky of dusk, visibility was very poor inside. Tobio turned on the mobile phone camera function, relying on its light.

It was when he was coming around the corner. Someone was standing there——.

Tobio was familiar with that rear profile. Although wearing a white shirt instead of the school uniform, it was one of the group that he'd been following, doubtlessly the back of the friend who had attended the same school as him until the spring of this year.

"……Sasaki?"

Gingerly, Tobio called out.

Despite being called, Sasaki continued defiantly walking towards the back. …….He began to feel worried about what was up ahead. ……He began to wonder if the individual was conscious, or even human.

"Sasaki……what're you doing?"

Again, Tobio called out. Then the boy turned to face him. As his body turned back, the light that had been shining on his back now lit up his eyes.

"——!"

Tobio let out an inarticulate sound and shrank back.

From behind him……something huge was chewing. The something noticed him, and began coming towards him. ……It was a creature resembling a giant lizard. The mouth of the creature was painted with blood. The tongue emerged with a slurping sound as it stared at him curiously. The boy standing nearby was certainly Sasaki. It must be Sasaki. Tobio was convinced.

At that moment, something rolled over. Shining his light at it, there was the amputated head of a dog lying there.

There were deep scars on the head. The skin around the eyeball on one side had been scraped away.

“Hii!”

Tobio released a small scream, wincing at the sight.

The lizard begins munching on the dog. ……The sound of the chewing he heard earlier must have been……the sound chewing on the rest of the dog!

In front of him Sasaki remained expressionless, staring at Tobio, his neck slightly inclined. The chest of his white shirt has been stained red by the spray of the dog’s blood.

Sasaki——. He was Sasaki. It was the same classmate, the one he’d always go to karaoke and arcades with. But while he was always wearing a prankster’s smile, now he just stared at Tobio emotionlessly. “Sasaki,” he wanted to call out again but his voice wasn’t working. It’s probably because his body and mind have been paralyzed with fear.

“You……what are you doing?”

It was a question that Tobio somehow squeezed out.

“……oun……d”

Sasaki let out a sound. It was at a volume that you couldn’t hear unless you were focusing.

The next moment, right before his eyes the boy put on an otherworldly smile. His thin mouth open, eyes narrowed, gazing at Tobio with an eerie smile.

The lizard, which had eaten the dog, halted its meal and approached. It is impossible to feel any emotion from those eyes, whose appearance was that of an animal which has cornered its prey.

As Tobio's whole felt numb and cold, someone, who looked like Sasaki, slowly opened his mouth.

"Feed"

What sounded like a ripping whoosh of air, followed by a dull snapping sound from behind, reached his ears. Turning to face there, he found that the wood that had been propped against the wall had been cut in half. Tobio heard an additional wind noise, and turned back.

Tobio looked back to the front, where from the lizard's mouth a long slovenly tongue had extended wriggling sinuously like a tentacle. Saliva dripped along the tongue onto the ground.

At the tip of the strange tentacle, there was a hard sharp protuberance which functioned like a claw or fang.

Tobio noticed that his cheek has been cut. As he stroked his cheek, his hands became covered with blood. It had got him near the ear.

……Lizard……monster?

It was a creature that exceeded the common sense of at least Tobio. It was about 3 meters in size. At a length like that, it was reminiscent of the komodo dragon, though not even he could recall it as having such a strange tentacle instead of a tongue.

"……Found you……"

The thing with the appearance of Sasaki approached, smiling eerily, while saying so. The lizard monster in front of Sasaki responded.

Tobio instinctively grabbed the steel rod placed at his feet. Holding the steel in his trembling hands, he faced towards the monster.

"I-if this is joke stop it, Sasaki."

Although he tried to smile by forcing the ends of his mouth to rise. The muscles in his cheeks had completely tensed up in fear.

While Tobio held up the steel rod, the lizard monster approached with no intervention. Tobio responded by stepping back little by little.

He could not look away from the monster's eerily wriggling tongue. Intuitively, he knew that he'd be dead the moment he looked away from the tongue-like tentacle.

He didn't know how far the tongue can stretch, but thought it wise to take this opportunity to run and gain some distance. This was the verdict Tobio reached.

He gradually edged back little by little to gain distance.

(It's absolutely not a good idea to look away from that tentacle)

Tobio put a hand in his pants pocket.

He felt something hard with his hand. It's the extra coins you exchange for at the game center.

Tobio picked up the coins in his pocket, and tossed them at the lizard monster. The coins one could easily pay for caused the lizard monster's tongue to drop, resulting in a gap that felt he could escape during.

He changed his posture for escape and he immediately started running, but the tentacle which had stretched entered his sights. Tobio reflexively braced to defend himself with the cylindrical steel bar. But the tongue coils around the bar.

"Ku……"

He tries to shake of the tentacles wrapped around the bar, but an incredible force is applied on it.

His resistance was in vain, as the steel in Tobio's was removed by the tentacle. At Sasaki's signal, the monster lizard threw the seized round bar far away. A dry, metallic sound was heard from behind.

Returning to Tobio, its original prey, the monster lizard drew steadily closer step by step.

Tobio shrank back, enveloped in terror. He tries to escape again, but the tongue just wrapped around his leg, causing him to immediately trip and fall. As he tried to stand up, he watched as the lizard monster drew closer.

Watching this scene, the person with the appearance of Sasaki sneered. The lizard monster's tongue made sinuous movements, aiming the fang-like tip at Tobio.

I'm done for!

Having concluded so, something came between Tobio and the monster at breakneck speed.

……When nothing happened even after waiting a few seconds, Tobio curiously glanced towards the monster. ——Then, the tip of was cut off, and the lizard monster raised a wordless cry.

"I won't let you do it so easily."

Suddenly, he heard the voice of a young woman from behind. The owner of the voice, along with the sound of footsteps, appeared alongside Tobio. The girl was clothed in the school uniform from somewhere. The year is about the same. Her hair was tied up in the back.

For Tobio it seemed like he had seen this female student before somewhere, but……probably because of the confusing situation, he could not properly remember.

As Tobio glanced at the girl, she took one step forward.

"I'll be your opponent."

So she said to the lizard, holding her hand out front. Responding to the girl's provocation, Sasaki instructs the lizard monster with his hand. The lizard's tongue tried to attack her with the claw. ——In an instant, there was something that continued to pass between Tobio and the girl and

tremendous speed. It disappeared into the darkness while grazing the monster's side at high speeds.

An instant later, the monster's tongue quietly dropped. Its neck having been severed, its head dropped to the ground. While yelling its body lost strength and fell to the ground.

As though he had lost consciousness at the same time, the person who looked like Sasaki also dropped on the spot.

Still encompassed with fear, Tobio was in too much of a confused state to understand what had happened. The lizard monster——it died. An organism like the one with the severed neck, it should not exist. Even if it did, at the very least it would defy common sense.

From the darkness ahead, flapping was heard, like that of large birds of prey——a bird that looked like a hawk came flying in their direction. The bird, which perched on the girl's arm, was chiefly playful. The girl also stroked the bird's head saying, "There, there". Earlier, what passed Tobio was apparently the bird now perched on the girl's arm. If that's what happened, then was it this bird that defeated the monster?

He was still doubtful, but Tobio now was relieved to that he had survived. He sighed quietly.

But his relief was fleeting, as Sasaki who was lying on the ground became enveloped by a mysterious luminous phenomenon. It also enveloped the now deceased lizard monster. It was a blue light, which was being emitted from something circular on the ground, which was carved with unfamiliar characters. ……As if, it seemed like a "magic square" often seen in games and manga. The thing similar to a magic square gives off a more dazzling brilliance that would make one want to cover their eyes. ……After the flash ceased, he looked at the location, where the lizard monster and Sasaki were no longer to be found.

……After a phenomenon akin to being pinched by a fox[2], what had unfolded before Tobio's eyes left him so taken aback that words failed him completely.

"Ikuse……kun, right?"

Not at all surprised by this phenomenon, the girl asks as she looks at Tobio's face.

"T-that's me……And you are……?

Tobio replies so. She seemed somewhat familiar. But he cannot remember clearly. It was certain he'd seen her somewhere……

"I'm Minagawa Natsume. You really……do not know……We've never spoken directly, so even your name and face didn't match up. If I hadn't seen your photo"

The girl, who called herself Natsume, took out her cell phone from the pocket of her skirt, and showed him the screen. Evidently, there seems to be a picture of Tobio as a cell phone image. This was what Natsume had wanted to convey by showing him her cell phone screen.

At the bottom, along with a familiar landscape, I had been photographed talking with old friends.

Seeing it, Tobio understood intuitively.

"You, you mean——"

When Tobio was about to say it aloud in surprise, Natsume continued his words while wearing a complacent smile.

"Uh huh, I'm a Ryoukuu High School second year survivor just like you.

[2] being at a loss of what to do

Part 2

“For me, I’ll have one rich vanilla cream with syrup and something from the drink bar. Errr, what do you want to order Ikuse-kun?”

“No thanks, I’m good.”

Tobio shook his head.

“Well then, in that case.”

Responding to Natsume’s order, the waitress goes towards the kitchen.

After the encounter with the person who looked like Sasaki and the attack of the lizard monster, the two of them visited a family restaurant. Natsume had said, “Since it’s a long story, let’s go somewhere else where it’s calm,” and brought Tobio here.

After she had returned to her seat having selected her drink from the drink bar, Tobio opened the conversation.

“What did you mean?”

“What?”

To Tobio’s question, Natsume responded with a light tone. With a slightly annoyed attitude, Tobio furrowed his brow and asked again.

“What was all of that? What’s the story behind this?”

‘That’ obviously referred to the earlier encounter with Tobio’s friend——the incident with Sasaki and the lizard monster. What was that monster? Tobio wanted to ask. Natsume, who was sitting across from him, at least knows something about that monster.

“As you saw, it was a monster and its master.”

Natsume answered without hesitation. Before Tobio can ask another question she continues.

“The being that looked like our classmate created that monster, which is called an ‘Utsusemi’. See, they’re a type of prototype independent-avatars——or so it would seem. Them and their monsters, collectively they are called ‘Utsusemi’.

As she says so, she wets her finger on the glass of iced coffee and writes the katakana characters for ‘Utsusemi’ on the table.

“Utsusemi?”

Not familiar with the word, Tobio put on a confused look.

“Uh huh, Utsusemi. Well that’s the official name……But well, they——and that girl as well, the Utsusemi all have the appearance of the Ryoukuu High School sophomores that went missing the day of the accident.

“Wha……”

Tobio was speechless. Natsume retains a serious look as she continues the story.

“While I don’t know the exact details, our 233 fellow students that were in the marine accident, currently, each and every one of them is paired up with a monster like the one we met a short while ago.”

She just kept saying one incredible thing after another.

Since the joint funeral, he had encountered other survivors of the accident. But he’d never met her before at Ryoukuu High School.

Having met someone with similar circumstances, this was beyond Tobio’s ability to comprehend.

Seeing the perplexed look on Tobio’s face, Natsume sighed and put a hand in her bag.

“I know it seems strange to suddenly be saying such strange things. Anyway, since you’ll be hearing it all again later, for now——“

She took a white round object out of her bag. It was about the size of a softball.

“My role is to make sure to give this to Ikuse-kun.”

Natsume put the white round object on the table. Tobio gingerly picked it up.

It seemed to be quite an ordinary round object. But, at that moment, the round object began to pulsate in time with his own heartbeat.

“Uwah”

Letting out a pathetic cry, Tobio dropped the round object on the table.

“You best treat it with care. Since you'll die without it.”

While scooping her spoon into the rich vanilla cream the waitress had brought, Natsume unhesitatingly said something ominous.

She happily scooped the vanilla cream into her mouth.

“Die, you mean?”

The worried Tobio protested Natsume’s ominous choice of words.

“The Utsusemi, it would seem, were intended for us students who survived the trip by not participating. In fact, weren’t you also just targeted? I have been targeted recently as well.”

“Such a ridiculous story, how could I possibly believe that?”

“It’s selfish not to believe Ikuse-kun, particularly considering you were attacked. If I hadn’t come along when I did, it probably would have killed you.”

He recalled how Sasaki and the monster unexpectedly disappeared while wrapped in the light from the magic square looking thing.

“……That light take took them”

“Uhuh. Somehow, upon defeating the monster, it causes the owner to fall unconscious ——when that happens, they both disappear along with that luminous phenomenon. It’s like fantasy.”

She chuckled and laughed. Tobio felt a sudden sense of understanding.

Natsume pointed her spoon at him.

“So, that ‘egg’ is important. Shouldn’t it be a valuable weapon for powerless normal high school students like us?”

Natsume looked out the window. Following her gaze Tobio also looked outside the store. In the branches of the trees by the sidewalk where people came and went, the bird from earlier was perched. The bird looked around while seeming jittery. Its sharp eyes could see for long distances.

“Well, since we can’t stay inside forever and my hawk-chan doesn’t see anyone sneaking around outside, should we leave soon?”

Natsume, having finished her rich vanilla cream, stood up.

“Hey, wait!”

Natsume drew Tobio who still had questions for her, and stood facing him. As Tobio was embarrassed by her sudden actions, she drew her mouth close to his ear while smiling complacently. Entering Tobio’s nostrils, there was a sweet scent coming from Natsume’s hair.

“Later, I’ll visit you at home.”

She whispered something profound in his ear and then left.

The completely stunned Tobio slapped his reddened face. He shook his head to clear his thoughts.

“……Hold it, she knows where my house is?”

Voicing such a question, he gazed at the round object she had brought.

‘Egg’——.

Would something be born from it?

Earlier, the pulsation he felt with his hand, it had been quite vivid.

With that eerie thought, Tobio put the alleged ‘egg’ into his bag.

Chapter 2 – Black Dog/Birth

Part 1

As soon as he got home to his apartment, Tobio sat down on the living room sofa. He let out a deep sigh.

He suddenly looked up at the ceiling.

——Was Sasaki commanding that monster lizard really not a dream?

He asked himself this, but the vivid memory was a clear rejection of that possibility.

There was something else with the appearance of Sasaki……

Are lizard monsters with tentacle-like things extending from their mouths things that actually exist in this world? Monsters like those that appear in the world of comics and games, can those exist in reality!? There’s no way! What reason could there be for such a monster to exist——.

…….

In silence Tobio buried his face in his hands.

……Was that a dream? Or a vision?

Could it be because of the immense sense of loss from the death of his classmates weighing on his mind and body that caused such a vision?

Wrong. The monster that Sasaki had commanded. That monster. It had injured him.

He looked over towards his bag that was laying sideways.

From the slightly open mouth of the bag, he caught a glimpse of a round object.

Along the way returning home, there were many times he considered throwing it away, however, since he would have been in danger of dying if not for Minagawa Natsume being there, he couldn't bring himself to part from it.

It's a ridiculous story. Their corpses having never been recovered, his missing fellow students then brought monsters and attacked him. Why would he have been targeted? No matter how he thought about it, there was no reason for him to be killed. What Minagawa Natsume had said, when you thought about it calmly it sounded like a strange joke.

However, Tobio saw the lizard-shaped monster. That monster's head was instantly sent flying by Minagawa Natsume's hawk. These events are facts. If he were to try to pretend that it's a dream, those distinct images will emerge from his mind.

……If that's the case that would mean that, not only Sasaki, but that the rest of his classmates for whose condition was unknown would be alive as well……? Likewise, that time that he saw Sae was also genuine? And that Sae, like Sasaki, carries a monster with her……?

No, it's too early for conclusions like that to be drawn Tobio thought. Although such things happening was incomprehensible, he didn't want to imagine that Sae would be alive trying to kill him with such a monster.

Sitting on the living room sofa, Tobio let out another deep sigh.

——I'm worn out.

Tobio's entire body was afflicted with fatigue. Even if he had the energy to make dinner, he had no appetite.

Tobio stood up and again looked at the bag. ……While gazing at the alleged 'egg', he at once began remembering the various things that had happened that day. Tobio picked up the bag that was still holding the 'egg', and placed it in the bathroom tub.

This should be good. He wanted to forget about this until tomorrow morning at least.

Tobio closed the door to the bathroom, returned to his room and lay down in bed. Attacked by drowsiness as soon as he lay down, Tobio immediately fell asleep.

Part 2

"Bauh!"

"Uwah!"

A large dog barked and Tobio let out a pathetic cry. His back was even bent over.

"Hey, you haven't been so surprised by the dog barking since around when we became junior high school students."

While rubbing the dog's head, Sae gave him a wry smile.

Sae's house. In the garden, there's a Golden Retriever that was entrusted to them from her relatives. It would appear that her family is looking after her while their relatives go on a trip.

When they were in junior high school, Tobio, having been called upon by Sae who was housing sitting alone on a holiday, he had arrived at her house.

He had been requested to service the dog by having it pursue him, but for Tobio personally, he wasn't at all like Sae who wasn't at all weak when it came to being pursued by animals.

Usually getting along well with people, the Golden Retriever, which would act with the spirit of a naughty spoiled child, upon recognizing that he wasn't Sae, used all the energy in its large body towards acting spoiled towards Tobio instead. For people who like dogs, they would find such conduct enjoyable, but for someone who's weak with animals it would be seen as nothing but menacing.

While rapidly wagging its tail, the dog chased Tobio who fled from the garden. To chase a fleeing opponent, that is a dog's instinct. Appropriately motivating the dog, Tobio had become the best playmate for handling the dog. Although, this was no different than having a wild animal chase Tobio.

"Hey! Come on!"

Even if he got angry, once the Golden Retriever's playfulness was this fired up, there was nothing that could be done to end it quietly.

"Ahahaha! Do your best, Tobio."

Speaking of Sae, she was sitting on the porch watching the frantic Tobio.

"Idiot! Help!"

Such an appeal was in vain, as Tobio was then defeated by the dog leaping on him from behind, falling face down in the garden.

The dog then mercilessly climbed onto his back and began sloppily licking around his head.

"Uwah! Jus-, stop, hey! Uowaaaaah!"

Tobio was on the garden lawn, half teary-eyed as twisted and struggled, but the dog's assault did not stop.

"Kinjirou! Stop!"

With that command of Sae's, the dog named Kinjiro stopped teasing Tobio. It quickly distanced itself from Tobio and exhibited proper sitting pose behavior.

The dog's onslaught having ceased, Tobio took the opportunity to slowly stand up. His appearance was completely haggard.

Becoming truly worried, Sae timidly peered at Tobio's face.

"A-are you okay?"

"……I, I'm okay"

Somehow, he was barely able to reply so. Still, regarding the presence of the large dog, Tobio had yet to grow accustomed to it.

Sae gently stroked Tobio's head.

"I'm sorry, Tobio."

With Sae publicly behaving as one would comforting children, Tobio was unable to get angry at her.

It was because of how pleasant it was. Because of the gentleness transmitted from her hand, it was exceedingly comfortable.

If his friends had been watching him, it would have been an embarrassing scene. Exempting the dog, him presently being cuddled was something he would never show anyone.

However, Sae's warmth would sometimes cause his mood to be at ease.

"Truly, Tobio is completely useless against Sae-chan"

Just like that she wore a small amused smile. Looking behind, the beloved grandmother had been there.

Tobio hurriedly moved away from Sae uttering excuses.

“This, This is……so, just a little…!”

Watching Tobio’s reaction, grandmother and Sae as well had nothing but pleasant smiles. It would not be so embarrassing for Tobio if the situation was reversed.

Tobio let out a deep breath despite the grandmother, stroking the Retriever’s head. Suddenly the grandmother muttered.

“……You're wasted on that damnable dog, Tobio. Someday, that child have chosen you without fail……no, it appears she may have already chosen you even if it isn’t obvious.”

Those words that the grandmother had spoken, Tobio was unable to understand……yet as she watched the dog with a gentle gaze, despite how transient it was, those words were impossible to forget.

Part 3

“Sae……Baa-chan……”

When he woke up, it was his own room he saw. The room was dark.

——He’d been having a dream.

Of time spent with the two beloved people no longer present——.

Tobio wiped the tears he had unknowingly shed. Only shifting his gaze, he looked at the clock display in the room. It was already around midnight. ……He was still tired. Let him continue sleeping like this until

morning. There's school tomorrow, so it'd be good to have a bath in the morning.

Bath——.

That's right, there's an 'egg' in the bathroom. At that moment Tobio remembered the 'egg', as well as the incident with the monster, and also recalled the matter of Natsume.

——Go to bed.

In that way, Tobio made his choice. Being alone, he just wanted to sleep until morning without consideration for anything else.

He closed his eyes, shut down his consciousness.

……

……And yet, how he wondered. His mind was abuzz. His consciousness would not completely shut down. There was some kind of sensation enveloping his body. Tobio slowly opened his eyes. The room was dark. The only sound was that of the alarm clock needle ticking in the silence.

His mind was restless. Now why would that be?

Suddenly he looked towards the closed curtain. He reached towards it with his hand. By pulling a little bit, he looked out.

"——!"

At that moment, Tobio's body stiffened.

——From the gap in the curtain, there was someone peering in.

He closed the curtains in a panic. ……No, there's no way! This was the fifth floor of the apartment complex. Moreover, the window next to the bed didn't have a balcony. On the other side of the window there was nothing. Tobio got himself out of bed, and gingerly reached out to the curtain again. Vigorously, he pulled the curtain to see out the window.
——But no one was there.

As before, did he imagine it? Having seen those kind of things in the evening, was he now having strange hallucinations?

Tobio opened the window, stuck only his head out, and restlessly looked around. Still, there was no change. There was no one there. Tobio let out a deep breath in relief. At that moment——.

Pota…….

Something fell onto Tobio's head. He touched it with his hand. ……It was some kind of sticky liquid. ……The liquid had fallen from above?

"……ound……"

Noticing a voice, at that moment Tobio abruptly looked up.

"Found you."

He looked up into a face smiling thinly. A gloomy boy of about the same age——something like a large spider with multiple legs was clinging to the wall of the condominium in an inverted posture. From the spider's mouth, there was sticky saliva dripping.

"——!"

The surprised Tobio, immediately drawing his head back into the room, intended to shut the window. ——But the spider monster was preventing the window from closing with its legs. Feeling fearful of the powerful strength that was being transmitted through the window, Tobio hurriedly took a step back from the spot.

The boy, meanwhile, entered slowly through the window accompanied by the spider monster. When he stood in the center of the room, he stared at Tobio while showing a thin smile.

"Found you. Traitor."

With broken language, the boy said that. The accompanying spider monster turned towards him with a strange glint in its eyes.

——Utsusemi.

Right, the being in front of him was the same as Sasaki's from that evening. Someone with the guise of a fellow student had brought a monster. ……Could this one also have been a student of Ryoukuu High School? He was not an acquaintance. But, it was probably a fellow student. That is if Natsume's words were to be believed.

After lizard is spider, huh…… Tobio felt it was apparently ironic that neither of them were good creatures to encounter.

……Either way, he'd be killed at this rate. In front of the boy's eyes, the spider monster gave off an indescribable force that was the real deal. With all that killing intent directed at him, Tobio was instantly able to appreciate that.

With his body dominated by fear, Tobio began to run towards the door of the room. Something like spider's silk came flying at his feet, but with difficulty he was somehow able to open the door while avoiding it. Having done so, he began passing through the living room at a run towards the entrance. Immediately, he tried to escape. This was best choice with the highest survival rate.

Tobio arrived at the entrance, removed the chain, and opened the door——. On the other side of the door, a lone girl was standing there. Beside her, what seemed like a giant frog monster sprang from the corner.

"Found you."

Speaking such words, the girl's hand reached forward. In response to that, the frog that had sprung from the corner opened its massive mouth. Just like the lizard monster he saw in the evening, its reaching tongue had something like a claw resembling a sharp fang. In accordance with the girl's instruction, the frog's tongue came jumping out at Tobio!

"Dammit!"

While cursing, Tobio immediately stooped his body. He felt the air shift as the grotesque tongue cut through the air above him as it went passed. He had just barely managed to avoid it. Having just barely escaped that attack, he had no intention of taking any more.

Utsusemi, this girl as well!

Tobio somehow righted his posture, but there were footsteps approaching from behinds——. Looking behind him, the boy and thing with the guise of a giant spider had reached the living room door. The girl and the frog monster were also invading from the entrance.

——He was caught between them.

The girl Utsusemi from the front, the boy Utsusemi from behind. The two of them gradually drew closer. In the middle of the hallway from the entrance to the living room, Tobio was in the abyss of despair.

——He'd be killed at this rate.

Mercilessly the two people who were Utsusemi have been inching closer. They had the appearance of classmates he did not know. Could he have been acquainted with them from before that incident? Aside from being killed by a classmate, getting killed by a classmate who doesn't know him is highly unpleasant. In this predicament, Tobio had such thoughts circulating.

——But, the door to the bathroom suddenly jumped into Tobio's eyes. In that instant he was suddenly reminded.

In the bathrooms tub——was the 'egg'! That right, he'd put the 'egg' over there.

——Since you'll die without it.

Natsume's words were repeated in his mind. Remaining vigilant, Tobio steadily decreased his distance to the bathroom little by little.

As he extended his hand towards the bathroom door, both of the Utsusemi reached out with their hands to direct their monsters. At the moment the monsters directed their killing intent at him, Tobio who was between them hurriedly moved to open the bathroom door. Taking the key in with him, he opened the door to the bathroom.

A moment later, he heard a loud noise from behind. Looking over his shoulder, he saw what looked the Utsusemi's tentacle had pierced through the bathroom door. As expected, if something of flesh and blood was struck by that it wouldn't just leave a hole for air to pass through.

Hurriedly, Tobio opened the bag he's placed in the bathroom.

"……This is"

Tobio saw the contents of the bag, at a loss for words. The 'egg', which was the size of a softball——had been cracked.

Cracked? Since when? There weren't supposed to be cracks here!

That what Tobio wondered, but it was certain that the 'egg' was broken……only the hard shell remained, though he could not confirm if this was evidence that something had been hatched.

(……There's, there's no way! Minagawa Natsume certainly said this was important! Without this, I'll be killed!)

Tobio quickly searched the interior of the bathroom, but the contents of the 'egg' were nowhere in sight. While it sounded ridiculous, it was Tobio's intuition that Minagawa Natsume's hawk had come from such an 'egg'——or otherwise he imagined that there would be some other organism inside. And thus, he had thought that when it emerged he'd be able to compete with the attacking Utsusemi. But instead it's……empty?

No way, was what Minagawa Natsume said a lie? Or perhaps, could he have been given an empty 'egg' by mistake?

For Tobio who had thought of the ‘egg’ as his last hope, he began to gradually be overcome with despair. Mercilessly from behind, the sound of the progressive destruction of the door was heard.

……There was no way to escape. All that was left to do was wait to be killed.

Collapsing right there, Tobio trembled as time counted down to his death. ——Now, it was that time.

——Dokun.

With his heart pounding from fear and tension——a very different pulsation and palpitation occurred in his body. Within his body——he attained a sense similar to something being produced from its depths, which until now hadn’t been there.

Dokun-dokun.

Little by little, though, from Tobio’s heart certainly——his entire body began to visibly pulsate, and a warm sensation was felt.

Indeed, there was ‘something’ unseen in his heart——. What the identity of this ‘something’ was, he knew not, only a sense of “soon it’ll be here”, was all he could understand. The pulsations did not stop. It was rapidly increasing. Simultaneously as the feeling of “the something will be here momentarily” that was approaching, there was also a feeling that it may be an illusion——no, for certain there was something emerging from Tobio’s body.

From behind in the meantime, a loud sound was heard. It would have to be the door being completely destroyed. From there, through the hole in the door, the boy Utsusemi’s face appeared. He had been caught.

“Found you.”

After saying as much, the face was withdrawn. The monster’s tongue stretched through the hole in the door and was trying to open the lock. The boy and girl Utsusemi appeared to have teamed up.

But, as if in response his heart had strengthened in the meantime, becoming increasingly faster.

Tobio put his hand of the bathroom shower. He turned on the water heater and put his hand on the faucet.

The boy Utsusemi accompanied by the spider entered through the now open bathroom door. As soon as it noticed his presence, its eyes narrowed as though with pleasure. The huge spider wriggled as it took aim at him.

Tobio faced the spider, and sprayed it with hot shower water that had been heated to the maximum temperature.

Hit in the front with the hot shower water, the spider that was completely covered suffered violently on the spot.

The counterattack had achieved payback——. That was such a fleeting thought, as from the boy Utsusemi's side, the girl Utsusemi showed up with the frog monster.

As soon as the girl saw the shower Tobio was holding and the state of the spider, she hid half her body behind the bathroom entrance. The frog's tongue with the tusk on the tip changed into a whip, which was swung straight at him.

Tobio instinctively dodged to the side, but as a result the frog's tongue severed the shower he was holding. With the shower having lost its tip, the hose meanwhile sprayed hot water vigorously.

Unable to handle being bathed in hot water, Tobio was forced to stop the water immediately.

As Tobio tried to avoid the hot water on the bathroom floor the frog tongue attacked. The surprised Tobio put his foot in the boiling water on the floor, and immediately felt the heat as his foot slipped. Fortunately by slipping he avoided a direct hit from the tongue……but he lost his balance and fell back towards the bathtub.

In pain from hitting his waist on the bottom of the tub, Tobio shut his eyes. When he opened his eyes, the frog was looking down at him from in front. From behind, the spider monster was crawling along the bathroom walls while being wary.

Murderous intent——. There is no doubt that was being emitted from both bodies was pure blood lust. This was what Tobio felt with his whole body.

To be killed——.

……I don't want that.

……This, an ending I don't even know the reason for……I don't want that at all……!

I don't want to die——.

I don't want to die I don't want to die.

I don't want to die I don't want to die I don't want to die I don't want to die I don't want to die I don't want to die I don't want to die I don't want to die.

……Someone, help me.

It was when he became filled with that thought. Tobio was attacked by a bout of intense heartbeats.

……Dokun. DOKUN!

His heart was beating so hard he thought others would surely hear it as well.

——bio. ——kay.

——Tobio. ——It's okay.

At this moment, in this situation, it can be said that what unexpectedly reemerged in Tobio's mind——was the voice of the old grandmother. With a wet wrinkled face, his grandmother was saying.

——Tobio. You are a blessed child. A child loved more than any other.

——Therefore, Obaa-chan wants you to be even a little bit happy, Tobio.

——So therefore, Obaa-chan, for just a brief moment, put a seal on the blessed Tobio.

——But you know, I'm sure that one day you are going to see much more painful things than right now.

——Just remember this, Tobio. The other you that is within you will save you when no one else can.

When he was younger, his grandmother held him close, and muttered in this way. The words, despite being words he still cannot understand, are carved upon the very depths of Tobio's soul.

——You are unique with this world, because "_____" has chosen you.

——Even if it's just the imitation of the shell of "___".

Inaudible——the word he was unable to remember, yet even so, despite circumstances, the voice of his grandmother gave Tobio an ephemeral sense of nostalgia.

DOKUN——.

He was struck with a conspicuously large pulsation. For a moment, he lost sensation in his body and his consciousness blurred……but immediately he recovered back to his original state. But, the next

moment, something flew at high speeds and passed the cheek of Tobio' who had landed in the bathtub.

Before his eyes, the face of the frog monster with its tongue hanging out——was pierced by what appeared to be a blade. A blade had extended to the ceiling while piercing the frog. The frog monster was swiftly slammed into the bathroom ceiling. Seeing that, perceiving that there was danger, the spider monster vanished from Tobio's sight.

He himself had collapsed into the bath tub. There behind him——was the bottom of the tub. What was it that had jump out from back there?

After regaining his posture, Tobio looked where the blade had come from.

——From the his own shadow, a single sharp blade had emerged.

As Tobio watched with bated breath, the shadow he was projecting wriggled as though possessing a will of its own. The shadow gradually took shape——its appearance amazed Tobio.

What had emerged from the shadow was a single puppy with black fur.

The puppy's forehead had a sharp protuberance——the blade had sprout from there. The puppy jumped out of the tub, pulling the blade out from the frog it had pierced to the ceiling. The frog monster fell to the floor, still alive despite the large amount of blood flowing from its face. The frog monster, still possessing a hole drilled in its face, again attacked with its tongue's sharp tusk that it has used on Tobio——only it fired it at the puppy.

- Zashu~*, such a cutting sound resounded in the bathroom.

——Flesh was scattered. The monster's tongue, and even its whole body, was sliced to pieces, its flesh scattered all over the bathroom. The puppy had jumped out instantly and chopped the frog with the blade on its forehead……!!

Systematically, the jet black puppy jumped from wall to wall of the bathroom, instantly carving up the frog monster, and now went after the initial spider monster.

With the loss of the frog monster, the girl Utsusemi lost consciousness and collapsed on the spot.

At the boy's direction, the spider monster that accompanied him, having judged the situation to be hazardous, began to withdraw. The puppy did not permit this, growing a pair of blades like wings from its back to close the distance.

Tobio was astonished by this series of events.

……From his own shadow, a puppy……was born? Instead of the 'egg', it emerged from the shadows? This dog that can grows blades. That blade, it instantly turned the frog monster into chunks of meat.

Although phenomenon that exceed the imagination kept occurring one after another, the black puppy before his eyes gave him a powerful feeling of 'something'. Just like earlier, that pulsating feeling——was no different from that from this puppy. This small black dog that he'd called on his own. No, did he call this dog……?

As the boy Utsusemi was retreating, the black puppy, not failing to realize, closed the distance in the blink of an eye. The black puppy, like a black bullet, shot right past the side of the spider monster. When all had subsided, the spider monster that had been following the boy lost its strength. A beat later, and the spider's body split in half. Having lost the spider, the boy dramatically dropped in place just as the girl had before.

In less than one minute's worth of time, the puppy had dispatched the bodies of the two monsters.

And suddenly it was silent. The Utsusemi weren't moving. After a while, what looked like a magic square emerged again under the Utsusemi and monsters, which then vanished in a flash of light.

……Only Tobio and the puppy were left behind in the bathroom. The puppy twitched its ears, and began to utilize its nose. Probably noticing something, the puppy vigorously leapt out of the bathroom. As it left the bathroom Tobio followed it.

He caught up to the puppy in the living room. Looking down at the scene, Tobio was at a loss for words.

Because a huge feathered organism had been waiting in the center of the room. The living room window had been broken. The creature had feathers, like an insect, its head, chest, and abdomen were divided into three, it also had six legs, but the head, rather than looking like that of an insect, looked more like a reptile's. The strange creature looked a moth's body with a lizard's head stuck on. Of course, the main point was the boy beside it that had invaded the room.

But, even in front of such a monster, the black puppy that had grown a blade was poised without any cowardice whatsoever. The puppy rushed into without hesitation. To avert its aim, the monster rose slightly——but the puppy instantly reacted by kicking off the wall to continue its pursuit. Continuing the hectic chase, in a flash two of the monster's legs had been cut off.

Because of its bulk, the winged monster's maneuverability was limited in the room. Correspondingly, the black dog's small body was highly preferable for maneuverability. The way it was, the puppy's method would end it through tactics.

In this way while Tobio was grasping the situation, the monster's principle boy was visibly instructing the monster with wide, mowing hand motions. The feathered monster gave off a dull glint in its eyes, and as the puppy launched its second attack——it deliberately let itself get struck head on! This meant that the puppy's blade would easily pierce deeply into the monster's chest, but it also allowed the monster to tightly grab the puppy with its remaining four legs. With things as they were, it flapped its wing and rushed out from inside of the room.

——The puppy was taken outside!

This was bad. This place was an upstairs apartment. Supposing that his expectation was correct, the monster's aim was——seemingly for it to fall from a great height. The monster intended to drop the puppy from high in the sky. Even if it was an alien dog that sprouts blades, if it was dropped from such a height……!!

Tobio, worried about the dog, decided to target the boy employing the feathered monster. After somehow or another gaining some distance, he quickly threw a nearby pot will all his strength at the boy's back, hitting his body. After letting out a choking voice, the boy fell dramatically where he was.

Having confirmed this, Tobio ran immediately to the balcony. The thought of the puppy's being taken into the sky was disturbing.

Having come to the balcony Tobio saw something in the moonlight—— it was the monster flying in the air in front of the apartment while holding the puppy. If it wasn't for the four legs holding the puppy that pierced its chest, it would have fallen at that very moment just then——. *Bashu-*, resounding in the night sky, a dull smashing sound was heard.

The image in Tobio's eye then, was a gigantic sword that had appeared in the moonlight. Tobio had clearly witnessed the moment of its appearance. In that way, just before the monster was about to drop it, the puppy's body emitted a frail light. The next moment, the puppy had undergone a transformation into a single giant blade, which pierced the body of the winged monster and scattered it.

The huge blade fell on the roof in front of the apartment.

……Tobio took a breath. In the moonlight in front of him, there was an irregular sword stuck in the roof of an apartment building.

Tobio's mind remembered from that.

—— You're wasted on that damnable dog, Tobio. Someday, that child have chosen you without fail……no, it appears she may have already chosen you even if it isn't obvious.

Ahh, Baa-chan. This is what that's called, isn't it? But, that is——.

——a 'dog'?

Tobio pressed a hand against his vigorously pulsating chest. The reason it was like that, was it fear. Or was it, perhaps, that he never expected himself to attain such power——.

"……Yours is amazing."

From behind he was heard a third party let out a strangled voice.

He was surprised to see the appearance of Minagawa Natsume enter his sight on the roof of the apartment. She had declared on the street outside the family restaurant she would be coming to visit.

"Are you okay? I was a little slow."

She looked at him while worried. Tobio sat on the spot, his mind inattentive, and replied, "Somehow."

When the light faded, as he checked to make sure of the winged monster's master, he swallowed the words "I wish you'd come a bit sooner."

The hawk was now perched on the sofa overlooking the room, the series of attacks having now calmly ended.

"I was also surprised. Having communicated with you at the family restaurant this evening, I was going to come over and talk things over with you, but you were under attack when I got here. By three of them no less. That must have been tough for your second battle."

Natsume casually said that. Coming under attack by three people, and from this girl's perspective the only word to describe it is "tough".

Natsume let out a voice saying, "How cute!" She was currently holding the puppy. When it turned into a blade, the black puppy ended up stuck

on the roof of the apartment, so Natsume's hawk carried it back up to here. As the hawk was flying to the roof, the puppy resumed its original appearance.

——Blades appear from of its body!

But, despite Tobio's worrying Natsume held the puppy whose body was now free of blades. Wagging its tail like a normal puppy, it was being fawned on by Natsume.

That puupy's small body of jet-black fur contained the strength that slaughtered those monsters. Extending blades from its whole body, it had demonstrated such an incredible power.

"Well, let's get out of here."

Natsume made such a proposal.

"To think I had hoped to remain here for a while, but it can't be helped. Please go pack some luggage, but only the basic necessities. Our opponent knows about your house. Besides, even if you defeated them once, after one hour, no perhaps after thirty minutes wouldn't they attack again?"

Tobio agreed that the danger was only passed temporarily.

"……With a commotion such as this, I wonder if someone reported it."

Tobio suddenly spoke aloud such a thought.

Right, the window was broken, and the bathroom had been destroyed up to the door. With such disruptive sounds, it would not be surprising if the nearby residents started an uproar. However, Minagawa Natsume shook her head.

"……They finish preparations before an attack, so such a commotion does not occur. Everyone would have remained deeply asleep."

……He could not understand the significance of what she had so calmly mentioned. It was beyond Tobio's ability to comprehend. However, this

couldn't be said to be a joke, since it felt like this sense of abnormality was just the current state of affairs.

Natsume turns with a smile and says.

"Since I know of a good place to hide from them, let's go there."

"A place to hide?"

"Yup, it's where I live now. It's a place one can safely spend time after escaping the Utsusemi. Therefore, because I'll tell you many things you need to know, you should quickly get ready to go!"

Pushing on Tobio's back, Natsume hurriedly urged him on.

"Is there truly such a good place? I mean, if we clean up here——"

"Dah! Because it's good, go get your luggage ready!! It's not safe here! If you try and complain, Onee-san will drag you there by your underpants."

As one might expect, thinking Natsume's explosive word were indeed troubling, Tobio halted his questions and decided to return to his room to pick up his luggage.

Tobio and Natsume continued down the road late at night.

Tobio was carrying two large bags, one on his shoulder and the other in his hand. These large bags, which back at the house had been filled with only the minimum necessary luggage, were being carried as he followed Natsume, who was walking through the streets at night.

"At any rate, it's safer to leave populated areas."

As Tobio carried the heavy luggage, he did his best to keep up with Natsuem's quick pace. ——To Tobio's rear, the puppy came following after him while trotting.

Suddenly Natsume looked back. Her expression had changed dramatically. She directed her sharp gaze in Tobio's direction. Her eyes, though, were focused on what was behind Tobio.

As Tobio look looked back, he saw the black puppy that had been following him was directing its attention at the darkness just shy of the lamp's light, and was baring its fangs threateningly.

As it stared at the dark road with narrowed eyes, a gradually approaching figure appeared.

"No way……"

Tobio uttered anxiously while swallowing.

"Eeh, visitors."

Utsusemi——.

A boy approached underneath the lamp, looking eerily emotionless, giving rise to a feeling that he lacked a spirit. With a creeping sound by its side, a snake monster appeared suddenly from around the corner.

Tobio and Natsume avoided each other's gaze. They needed to determine their next action. To flee, or to fight.

But before they could do so, suddenly a flame-like phenomenon wound around the snake's body! With the serpent blazing fiercely on the dark road, its body writhing, its controller backed off to avoid being turned into charcoal——.

While Tobio was at a loss of words at this occurrence, Natsume, upon seeing the phenomenon, let out a sigh of relief.

With the serpent's death, the accompanying classmate——the Utsusemi was also transferred away by the magic square. With that phenomenon having been verified, the sound of steady footsteps was heard.

Appearing out of the darkness, a strange looking blonde girl stepped into the light. Also, the reason she was strange looking, she was dressed

in a cloak and a pointed hat. Though she looked foreign, she was dressed as though it was a witch cosplay. He found himself surprisingly fascinated by her most noble appearance. Although it hard to judge with foreigners, could she possibly be……about the same age as him.

The girl dressed as a witch, fixing her blue eyes upon Tobio and Natsume, spoke.

“You were slow, Natsume. You accidentally brought with you to meet me?”

Natsume took a profusely apologetic pose saying, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” to the girl. She was fluent in Japanese. Apparently she was acquainted with Minagawa Natsume… Starting with the combustion phenomenon, with all the series of events kept happening one after another, Tobio’s comprehension couldn’t keep up with it all.

Natsume approached the bewildered Tobio, taking one of the bags from his hands.

“Let’s go. They will attack this deserted area. Since we can’t go to any populated areas, we have to leave this area quickly.”

In response to Natsume’s serious tone, Tobio nodded, and they hastened away.

Part 4

“Come, enter enter.”

Late at night, Tobio had finally arrived the safe place Natsumi had spoken of——a certain apartment building. Allegedly a hideout in the forest, what he’d imagined was a place separated from urban areas, turned out to actually be place about ten minutes from the neighboring station. The appearance was also that of a very common apartment building, but……

While Tobio was still feeling a touch of uncertainty about whether they would really be safe from attack in a place like this, he was invited into a particular apartment. Chairs, a TV, a DVD player, just a modest room of shelves.

Pointing a finger at the blond girl, Natsume spoke again.

“This girl is Lavinia. As one of the residents who live in this hideout, she is our ally for the time being.”

The blonde girl——Lavinia bowed simple and said, “Please take care of me.”

After she finished this light greeting, with a rustling sound, Natsume began searching the shelves that furnished the room.

“Well then, so——first of all, you seek confirmation.”

Natsume, having spoken thus, then removed a specific DVD and inserted it into the player.

“Is that what you’ve been looking for since we arrived?”

Tobio inquired of Natsume.

“……It is for the purpose of reaffirming the circumstances of yourself and Natsume.”

The answer was surprisingly given by the blonde girl Lavinia.

Tobio began intently watching the video image that had appeared on the TV screen. It was news program covering a certain ship’s major maritime accident. It wasn’t something he didn’t know. For the last two months, that incident had been the greatest upheaval of his life.

The Heavenly of Aloha incident——.

The luxury liner that he and Natsume were supposed to have boarded. It had sunk along with their classmates, this ship with a ‘divine’ name. Although the video had no sound, Natsume also showed a complicated

look. Not just Tobio, she should also have been suffering these two months, carrying a mental wound from the loss of her classmates.

The video changed. What the screen now showed, it was somewhere in a city environment. In the video, similar to those taken with a home video camera, a group of young men and women were shown.

Tobio continued to watch with furrowed eyebrows.

“Is that……Yada……? Kojima……?”

Tobio was at a loss for words. Groups of young people were shown successively. There were many faces he recognized. Images of groups of young people were shown successively without pause. It was not fifty or a hundred.

The video was showing people that Tobio, until a moment ago, had believed their whereabouts to be unknown. However, the time stamp on the video, was a digital number indicating a period in June just half a month ago——.

The two-hundred thirty-three Ryoukuu high school sophomores still said to be missing. In reality, the chances of survival was practically nonexistent. But, on the video in front of him, everyone whose whereabouts was unknown was alive and active.

……While he didn’t understand why they were leading monsters, or what their reason was for targeting them, they……all of them were still alive.

Then, not only the classmates, but Sae as well——.

Tobio realized that from deep within himself, he could feel a glimmer of hope. His broken heart felt like it was healing little by little. But, that brittle feeling vanished with the next video.

One of the male classmates was shown on the screen. There was a monster like a crocodile at his side. From the monster’s mouth, a tongue languidly extended. ……No, it was a tentacle.

Other classmates were shown on the screen leading a variety of different monsters. Like the frog, spider, snake, and lizard he had just met…… Some looked like huge insects such as moths and mantises. There were ominous monsters whose size was impossible to determine, and also those with distorted appearances. They were monsters almost like those out of movies and games.

They were stretching their tentacle-like tongues, seizing a live pig. While the video had no sound, the appearance alone was tragic, as the monsters insatiably devoured the live pig. Blood was dripping from the edge of the monsters' mouths.

Tobio clutched at his mouth, while desperately bearing the feeling of vomiting that entered his throat, as he squinted at the video.

Natsume, who had seen the video once before, was also unable to look directly at the scene.

After that, Natsume's explanation began to mix with the video. The content was the ecology of the monsters and how to deal with them.

Although his head felt strange, Tobio somehow kept his sanity, and with a meek expression proceeded to fill his head with the information.

This is what Tobio understood——.

These creatures, they were monsters with frightening special abilities and high physical capabilities. For a petty attack, it would not be possible to cut the flesh beneath the skin.

For defeat, the nucleus or the head must be destroyed. It seems the nucleus is in the position which for a human would be called the heart. Their weaknesses were fundamentally no different than other living things. However, they were much sturdier than ordinary creatures.

She kept describing them as "monsters" as she spoke.

"This video, photographically documenting the truth of these peculiar roots, has been kept hidden by people like us. By no means is this CG,

nor is it acting. They are the Ryoukuu high school sophomores who went missing in the maritime accident. Our classmates. And now, they are controlling genuine monsters. Paired with their monster, they apparently are named——Utsusemi."

Natsume said so indifferently.

Lavinia continued.

"By Utsusemi, we mean things like imitations of people with artificial supernatural abilities——they would be categorized as something like Inou Tsukai[3], created by a certain organization existing in this country. They are being manipulated by the organization."

……. In the present situation there wasn't really anything to say.

……Tobio thought it was a ridiculous story.

Supernatural power to control monsters? Created by an organization somewhere in Japan? Moreover, manipulating classmates into attacking them? It's like a story from a manga or fictional movie. If he hadn't actually experienced it, he absolutely wouldn't have believed it. He would have judged it to be some human's crazy delusion.

But——there was no choice but to believe it. It was true they were pursued and attacked by a monster. And that which opposed it——was the black puppy that grew a blade from its forehead.

Looking at the puppy snuggled up beside him, the circumstances ensured that Tobio was unable to agree that these were crazy reckless statements.

Natsume continued.

"The Utsusemi, the operators that control the monsters——their bodies are only able to function as a set. And those bodies, our classmates who participated in the trip, there are 233 of them."

[3] Special ability users

To Tobio who was at a loss for words, Natsume asserted thus.

“And, they returned to Japan for the sake of killing the surviving students——me and you.”

“That's utterly ridiculous!”

Tobio’s few words of reproach.

It was natural of course. It’s because he was being targeted by classmates who’s become monsters.

It really was utterly ridiculous. However, what came to mind was the monsters that had attacked earlier——the Utsusemi. The hostility they harbored, that bloodlust was genuine. The evidence was that they’d certainly come to kill him personally.

Natsume spoke.

“There’s no doubt we will continue to be targeted in the future. They have been directed to target us who survived by not participating in the trip. The organization that’s manipulating them from behind, they are in need of acquiring us by any means necessary.”

“Just a moment……. Why are they targeting us?”

The question Tobio wanted answered most. What the heck was the main reason they were targeting him and Minagawa Natsume——having thought it over, that was all Tobio could come to. Gingerly Tobio looked at the puppy sitting beside him.

Also turning to her hawk, Natsume spoke.

“It seems to be that kind of thing. My Griffon, that puppy of Ikuse-kun’s, things that are similar to yet completely different to the monsters accompanying them.”

“——Sacred treasures. They are called Sacred Gears. So to speak, they are unusual powers called that. However, these are natural——you were born with this power. It is also not such a rare thing. Many of those

whose names have been recorded in history as well modern-day successful athletes have unknowingly possessed such power. However, in order for its distinct form to be realized, it is a necessary condition that one possess a certain amount of ability.”

Lavinia spoke indifferently. She seemed to be suffering from judgement from elsewhere.

“To say it in even more complete detail, the creatures you and Natsume were born with are classified as 'Independent Avatar Type' Sacred Gears. And, the Utsusemi are artificial imitations of 'Independent Avatar Type' Sacred Gears.”

……Unintelligible words being heard one after the other, Tobio’s brain was on the verge of a blowout.

……Sacred treasure? Sacred……Gear……? That’s what his own puppy and Minagawa Natsume’s hawk were, and the monsters accompanying the students that were attacking them……those were fake copies of them?

Natsume proceeded with the story without regard.

“The organization that uses the Utsusemi desired to obtain something like us by any means. Our abilities which could not be taken at the destination are absolutely necessary to them. To that end, they exerted influence over that trip to make use of the students of Ryoukuu High school. By having their whereabouts unknown, they seem to believe that such a change in circumstances would be beneficial for them. By using our classmates, I wonder if they’re thinking they could entice us into being careless. And now, those that are being manipulated, that last one tried to attack us by himself——that seems to be the case.

“What do you mean by 'seems to' and 'something like' that you’ve been saying for a while? Who taught Minagawa-san these things?”

Tobio asked this of Natsume, as she removed the DVD they’d finished watching from the player. With the DVD in one hand she says.

“I was taught from the person who gave me this. That supposed ‘Governor General’ of theirs. When I received this video footage, which I just showed Ikuse-kun, I also received an explanation.”

For Natsume and now Tobio as well, neither could hide their agitation. Even Natsume had suffered such unacceptable things, such as not being prepared for successive attacks by the Utsusemi.

“Additionally, I received three ‘eggs’ from that ‘Governor General’. One was for me, and now another is Ikuse-kun’s. I am the 'official' in charge of distributing the eggs. To be given such odd jobs, I wonder. Ugh.”

“What kind of difficult person is he? This supposed ‘Governor General’.”

Natsume also shakes her head at Tobio’s question.

“Hmm, not even I know. It appears that Lavinia and the other residents living here are aware of him, but as far as discussing the ‘Governor General’s’ true identity, it’s being kept a secret. But, I was told Ikuse-kun and I would be able to sort of meet him once I handed over the last ‘egg’.”

“……That’s right, I’ve been wondering. What exactly was that ‘egg’?”

Natsume followed up a beat later,

“It’s a Sacred Gear manifestation ‘egg’. My Griffon-chan was born from this ‘egg’. It’s should be something that’s for the sake of drawing out my inherent ability. He said something about it being like an ability triggering device. The ‘Governer General’ does that sort of research. I mean, wasn’t your puppy also born from there? It was a surprise, right! That dogs and birds would be born from within!”

——She answered merrily.

At Natsume’s answer, Tobio stared at the black puppy that was wagging its tail nearby.

……No, this puppy was not hatched from the 'egg'. This dog had emerged from his own shadow. ……Could that possess some sort of significance…….

However, the 'egg' was empty. Perhaps it was hatched then, so it might be a thing that was manifested.

Natsume was gently stroking the head of Griffon who was perched on the back of a chair.

"My Griffon——this hawk has helped me many times. Besides, that 'Governer General' said, 'It's the only thing that can support us. They will dispose of any danger that befalls us. It's the fate of those who have a Sacred Gear.'"

……Really, it's an unreasonable story.

Tobio's bewildered heart was filled with anger that had no place to go.

What this meant for Tobio and Minagawa Natsume, was that they possessed supernatural powers. A certain organization in this country, desiring their powers, attacked a luxury liner in the middle of the school trip. However, since they were not on board the ship, it was their classmates who received the damage intended for them, while the sailors who were unrelated to them lost their lives. ……Because of them, no, was it indeed because of them that so much sacrifice was brought into this world?

Was it his fault that Sasaki……his classmate, and now Sae were their captives, and were being manipulated……?

……Then again, on the flip side, could they even still be considered alive……?

Sae——was she alive?

"……There's just one thing, I'd like to ask, everyone……are our fellow classmates still alive?"

He could not consent. To this non-anticipatable, unilateral theft of his classmates. They'd been converted in Utsusemi or something in order to command the monsters. It was——their fault.

Sae was snatched away by those unknown people, her existence has been transformed to accompany a monster……

Natsumi was smiling broadly.

"Yeah, they're alive. Indeed, even my best friend, although now an Utsusemi, is most definitely alive.

"——!!!"

Hearing those words, Tobio became extremely excited in his heart.

……They're alive. ……Sae was also alive……!! No matter what condition she was in……Sae was not dead!! She was alive.

Welling up from within Tobio there was now a feeling of tremendous vitality and energy.

Until some time ago, do to a series of unreasonable incidents, fear of monsters dominating his spirit, but now he was able to understand that he couldn't not believe if he was going to gather his strength.

——For Sae and his classmates who were being controlled, was there really no way to reverse the process?

Natsume continued to speak while peering at Tobio's face, which was alight with passion.

"So, we've only talked about change. ……Will you not team up with me?"

Smiling Natsume made that proposal.

"You're teaming up with me. And teamed up, together we will defeat the organization behind the Utsusemi. Also, isn't it anxious being alone? Against some 200 or more people? There's not even ten of us students

who survived the trip by not participating. It's a simple calculation, that's a quota of more than 20 for each individual. If we're **careless**, it's possible there may be more."

"What do you mean, 'If we're **careless**'?"

"Isn't it unknown how many people may be captured from among us remaining survivors?"

Abruptly, Natsume said something frightening while being almost expressionless.

"Normally, I wouldn't fight a classmate. Since I have a good relationship with that individual, since that individual seems likable. Whatever happens, I'd hesitate when they appear before me."

He could sense the grief from Natsume's tone.

"There was this person with glasses who was attacking us two, my close friend was with him. Since the beginning of high school, I've been together with that friend forever. She, when I defeated that friend, there was suffering because I didn't show any hesitation…… Again and again I cried out to stop but, that individual was just filled to the brim with murderous impulse. Afterwards I was informed by the 'Governor General' about the series of circumstances, it **was clear** that something was born inside me.——Those individuals are alive. If they're alive, then I can save them! Now Ikuse-kun's thoughts have reached the same conclusion."

Natsume declared her decision to resolve herself to occasionally fight those classmates.

Tobio observed Natsume's eyes. Different from her when she used a joking manner, she was expressing a countenance of resilience and seriousness. Strength was transmitting from her pupils.

It's a courtesy. The greatest proposal from her. Given the current situation, two people felt more reassuring than one person. When

fighting the monsters, such as when they assailed his home, it was a good approach to have achieved a small component of victory.

Suddenly, he directs his gaze towards the black puppy sitting before his eyes. Able to grow a blade on its head, and even transform its body into a huge blade-like object. It was clearly a kind of monster. But——. Unlike the monster that attacked him, he couldn't feel any hostility or malice. Simply for those pupils to express such gentle radiance.

……To consider her to be an ally. To believe that a ray of hope can be obtained even in these strange circumstance.

Even if that's just a substitute that has overcome reality, if it has the "strength" to change the current circumstances——he will cling to it.

"——I'll save them, all of them."

And then, Sae will——.

Tobio's declaration was strong. Resolution and determination were born in his mind, his objective was decided.

For example, even if a classmate would be attacking, he would not hesitate to defeat them. He believed that to be the only way to save them——. That would probably happen on the road ahead, the existence that had warped their destiny. Of those people, he was going to save everyone. At that time, everything that has been stolen will be returned.

"Yeah!"

Natsume had a genuinely surprised look. Perhaps, it was due to the unexpected reply.

Readily approaching, she drew near to visibly confirm Tobio's face.

"Thank you! Really really!"

She repeatedly shook his hand up and down with a strong handshake.

“A,aah……. If you hadn’t come to help, I don’t believe I could have put those things I couldn’t cope with behind me.”

Simply by hearing Tobio’s words, her whole face broke into a smile as she made a guts pose.

“Alright, let’s go collect our fourth comrade!”

“Fourth?”

With a puzzled thought, Tobio asked in response. Natsume pointed her finger at the blonde girl.

“Right, Lavinia is also an ally. And all those support personnel from the ‘Governor General’. That is to say, although the residents of this apartment building all have special circumstances, it’s not that everyone’s a bad person. Afterwards I’ll also introduce you to another child who's our ally. He’s a cheeky brat though. And then, there’s one person left, the young man I needed to pass the last ‘egg’ onto. He’s also from the group of Ryoukuu High School survivors.”

Expressionlessly, Lavinia raised her hand.

“My best regards. For the time being, I’ll assist you as a magical girl.”

……Ma, magical girl……? From Lavinia’s statement, the image of the combustion phenomenon that happened before on the road passed through his mind.

In spite of Tobio having no choice but to incline his head, the delightful Natsume declared:

“Then, our next action is settled!”

“Next action?”

“Eeh, we now have to join up with the young man I delivered one of the ‘eggs’ to. That young man is also residing in this hideout temporarily, he just went traveling outside for some reason. Though, since the

classmates who are Utsusemi also survived, it feels strange for us to be considered survivors."

To the grumbling Natsume who was muttering something, Tobio asked again.

"This young man, who is it?"

"It's Samejima Kouki. Anyway, let's move into this apartment building as a headquarters."

Samejima Kouki——Tobio was startled to hear that name.

It wasn't a name he hadn't heard before. At the original Ryoukuu High School, he was known as one of the delinquents——.

Chapter 3 First Half – Companion/Fourth Person

Part 1

Tobio welcomed the morning in one room of the 'hideout'. It was a modest room with only one bed and a desk. Seeing the black puppy curled up asleep at the foot of the bed, he recognized anew the truthfulness of yesterday's events. While lying in bed, Tobio exhaled.

……He had also found a ray of hope amid despair. No matter how, in spite of having been attacked by a reality that was hard to accept, he still wanted to save everyone……Sae as well.

Tobio again hardened the resolve in his heart. Having obtained a strong determination, Tobio went over in his mind what today's goals were.

——Go to meet one of the delinquent students of Ryoukuu High School named Samejima Kouki.

Still in bed, Tobio recalled what he knew about Samejima Kouki. The last time he'd seen him, it was at the joint funeral for their classmates.

That would have been a few weeks after the “Heavenly of Aloha issue” maritime accident——.

It was sunny that day Tobio remembered. During a cloudless blue sky the joint funeral service was solemnly performed. It had become unknown whether the 233 students of Ryoukuu High School were alive or dead, however their survival became seemingly hopeless. The remains of the teachers, as well as the crew of the “Heavenly of Aloha”, were found, and were included in the joint funeral.

Outside of the funeral home, the area was overflowing with the media who’d returned, having sniffed out the information, which was also reported on TV.

The funeral ceremony was held on behalf of all the bereaved parents. The funeral was still held under circumstances where it remained unconfirmed if they were alive or dead. Tobio had been doubtful about how they were able to proceed with such a meritorious performance without even the slightest hitch.

The seats for students who like Tobio had survived without having participated in the school trip numbered less than ten seats. There were some vacancies. There was a colleague standing in front of the microphone, saying words of farewell. Listening to them, sobbing leaked out from the bereaved families. But, it was strange. Absolutely, there was this feeling as though the funeral was just being acted out. From the bereaved families, especially those who were parents of students, their sadness gave off a feeling that this was similar to a staged performance. The bereaved families of the students, excluding their crying, didn’t appear like those who are genuinely sad, and despite the situation did not have the appearance of haggardness. At that place, he visibly felt as though it was only the appearance of emotions of sorrow covering up indifference.

At least at the time of his grandmother’s funeral, there wasn’t such a strange feeling of discomfort. It harbored only the sadness that comes from parting with a loved one.

Despite Tobio's doubts, the funeral had progressed. Thinking back on it now, that "discomfort" had been there at that stage.

The funeral had progressed and already the time for it to conclude was approaching. Then the door was vigorously thrown open by someone entering. About the same age as Tobio, he was a boy whose hair had been dyed a light brown. Everyone in attendance had focused on his appearance. Clasped in the boy's hand was a bouquet of flowers.

A delinquent had briskly intruded with extreme rudeness. With an expression of surliness in the presence of the deceased, he stood and looked upon a certain memorial portrait. The figure in this portrait, that person was a fierce looking boy with hair dyed brown.

Then, he softly placed the bouquet he had brought upon the altar.

"You idiot……"

Without even joining his hands, he said as much, and then immediately turned on his heal to leave. Having appeared like the wind, the delinquent went and left like the wind.

For Tobio, what left the great impression on him from the joint funeral, was this scene.

It was Samejima Kouki. The most feared delinquent of Ryoukuu High School.

Looking up at the ceiling, *fuu*……letting out a deep sigh, Tobio again sank his head into the pillow.

"……Ryoukuu's number one delinquent……Samejima."

Even if he had no prior memory of Minagawa Natsume, he could still distinctly remember Samejima Kouki.

With such self-derision, he covered his eyes with his arm. In the case of that young man in high school, since he carried such a title of delinquency it was only that he remembered him, or so he thought. It

was the one type of person that one must avoid during everyday school life.

“Shark isn’t a bad person.”

Such a voice was heard from nearby. It was a girl’s voice. Tobio leapt to his awake and began examining the bed. He pulled back the comforter and there was——

“Good morning.”

Wearing a single white button down shirt was the figure of a blonde haired girl——it was Lavinia.

“Wha……Whaa……!”

Tobio was unable to enunciate when faced with such an excessive occurrence. During his life, something like being in the same bed as someone of the opposite sex had never happened (to be precise that had happened when he had taken a nap together with Sae when they were young, but because they were young children it doesn’t count) so this was especially a great surprise.

What had now burst into his vision——was the visibly snow white skin of her thighs. Since it was just a single dress shirt, Lavinia’s legs were almost completely exposed. A scene that is poisonous to a healthy high school boy, yet also medicinal. With the sunlight flowing in from the window, the white dress shirt appeared to be transparent.

With his cheeks dyed red, Tobio turned away while asking her.

“W-why are you here……!”

He noticed that his own voice sounded nervous, and furthermore he felt very much ashamed.

Without bearing any mind, Lavinia spoke while rubbing her eyes while half asleep.

"……Last night I got up to go to the toilet. The next thing I noticed I was in this bed."

The next thing I noticed I was in this bed——. There was no way Tobio could believe something so excessively ambiguous, nor was there any way to know how long her body had been here.

"In what way is this a problem?"

As Lavinia conversely inclined her head and enquired, Tobio retorted, "You're asking me that!" and the two began to bicker.

Tobio, having concluded the current mood was too maddening, changed the subject.

"……So Shark, that's Samejima?"

Earlier, Lavinia had said 'Shark'. At that time he had muttered the name of Samejima. 'Same (鮫) = Shark', it's simple but that's how it seems to be.[4]

Lavinia answered right after one yawn.

"That's right. Shark is Shark. Because his mood is really shark-like I thought it was perfect."

Samejima has a shark-like mood…… Is it because he's a delinquent and is thought of as aggressive? Still, when Samejima was at Ryoukuu, despite being a delinquent, he was the type whose popularity with girls was considerably good. It was the so-called good-looking bad boy type. Still, flirtatious speech was never once to be heard from him, only talk of his heroic face entered one's ear.

Lavinia continued speaking.

[4] The first character of Samejima (鮫島) means shark. Lavinia uses the English word.

“Shark it seems did not return to this apartment building last night. Perhaps, I think he was outside exterminating Utsusemi using the sacred treasure.”

……Outside exterminating Utsusemi, huh. To call that extremely daring, that exceeds reckless behavior. He probably also possesses an animal sacred treasure, something like an independent avatar type, just like Minagawa Natsume’s. So it should be possible with Utsusemi for opponent, but what’s most surprising is the mental fortitude. ……Something like fighting those monsters all day long, is he able to manage that? For himself at least, it was unlikely Tobio would be able to use calm judgement. Just considering the degree of mental and physical fatigue, such an approach seemed to be very haphazard.

……It took strong determination to be able to go out like that, but would Samejima’s possession of such an unshakable purpose would be enough? For him to be facing the likes of such battles alone with only the unusual temperament of a simple delinquent, that was difficult to imagine.

Moreover, there was one troublesome special characteristic of the 'Utsusemi'. Tobio was remembering the information on the 'Utsusemi' he’d received last night.

Utsusemi——the monsters they are utilizing, once they’ve memorized the smell of their opponent from the blood of their prey, they can transmit knowledge of that scent to their fellow Utsusemi. For Tobio, this happened when the Utsusemi employed by his friend Sasaki cut his cheek. Apparently it seemed to have memorized the smell from his own blood that was spilt at that time. The Utsusemi would then pursue their targets by tracing the scent of the opponent that had been memorized on that one occasion. And thus, the Utsusemi had invaded Tobio’s home.

Was there anywhere could he have found relief where he might not be discovered.

Since they broke into his home he hadn't thought to return——yet. But, contrary to his desire, it was extremely easy to attack that place. The shock was immeasurable.

As he had heard it, Natsume was also already attacked at her home, and told him that she had ended up here. She currently lives in another room in the same condominium.

The condominium this 'Governor General' had prepared, it was located on the outskirts of the city. It seems it was composed of some special structure, which made it a place the Utsusemi couldn't find easily.

……Since earlier at his house, he had since gained an understanding of the other party. Tobio and company had already obtained amounts of information on the existence of something like an organization that was manipulating the Utsusemi. ……Though he hadn't understood why those people couldn't seize this condominium. It seems he had no choice though, that in order to those who had made to become Utsusemi, they would have to find the other party's stronghold before such a result was achieved.

……There's not much time, he thought. Within this limited time, how he should live, how strong must he become, that, Tobio was able to understand, was the current dilemma.

Abruptly, Lavinia inquired while looking at the black dog.

"……Toby, there's one thing I want to ask."

Toby……. Apparently he was also given a nickname the same as Samejima, Tobio understood.

"Wh-what's the problem?"

While gazing at the black dog with her blue eyes, Lavinia stated her question.

"——This Doggy-san, did it hatch from the 'egg'? That is, originally, it did emerged from breaking out from inside that 'egg' by shattering it, right? I'm concerned about whether or not it was born that way."

……

……Tobio could find no words to reply with. The egg——it had been broken, but it was empty. The dog——it had emerged from his own shadow. The scene she had described, in which it emerged from breaking out from inside by shattering it, he'd never seen it.

"……How did you hear about that?"

Gulping, Tobio answered as such.

Lavinia––stared intently at the puppy. The blue eyes of the young girl and the red eyes of the puppy.

"……This Doggy-san, it evidently has a different ambiance than what Natsume and Shark possess."

……Minagawa Natsume's Griphon had a different ambiance……. Tobio had not given voice to such feelings at the time, but the only thing that he intuitively understood was that there was something suspicious about the puppy's existence.

"Toby, if this Doggy-san is also a Sacred Gear, there's a simple rule relating what form it takes, its ability, and how it manifests its power."

Lavinia said it straight while placing a hand on his chest.

"——The power of desire. The sacred treasure——Sacred Gears become strong from strong desires, responding to the possessor. It is almost certain that that Doggy responded to Toby's strong desire."

……The power of 'desire'. That is to say that the black puppy would become powerful in response to his desires……?

Tobio was also staring at the puppy, the person in question wearing nothing but a blank look.

——Then, as Tobio and Lavinia were staring fixedly at the puppy, there was a knock on the door that had been left open.

“Good mornin—. The door is open—?”

Natsume appeared in the room saying as much. Having been certain he’d securely locked the door the when he entered last night, the surprised Tobio immediately arrived at the thought, “Incidentally did Lavinia unlock it when she came here?”

“It’s morning already. Get up quick-like, everything’s rea—dy! Waaoh! What are guys doing?”

Natsume was horrified by the situation she saw here. That is to be expected. It had become the same as a room where a man has taken a woman to bed.

“N-no, this is……!”

This was Tobio standing up offering an unsatisfactory excuse.

“How disgraceful? Such things are said in Japanese Manga at times like this.”

Such indifferent words issued from the mouth of the expressionless Lavinia. One would be tempted in their heart to insert a Tsukkomi[5] of, “What kind of manga is that!?”

“Hey, oy oy oy oy oy! I didn’t do anything!?”

While pointing her finger at Tobio, who could do nothing but frantically try to explain, Natsume called him out.

“Ikuse-kun! Although it is wonderful to deepen one’s relations with a new comrade, wouldn’t this be deepening them too much!?”

“T-that’s, this is……!”

[5] Roughly speaking, this is retort, usually comedic in nature

Natsume issued her objection as she approached until their faces were in close proximity——she was smiling broadly.

"Ju-ust kidding. I got you. Anyway, Lavinia wandered in here I the middle of night while half asleep, am I right? She's always entering my bed in the same way. Besides, in my judgement, Ikuse-kun is very sincere when it comes to girls."

…….

……Looking over at Lavinia, there was a blonde maiden saying, "That is so" in agreement. ……The misunderstanding was likely cleared up, but this in no way caused Tobio's mind to be fully satisfied.

In the room where they'd watched the video the previous night, the trio of Tobio, Natsume, and Lavinia had a late breakfast.

——Regarding said breakfast, what had been laid out before Tobio's eyes was a kettle and cup ramen. Natsume and Lavinia began to prepare, hastily pouring the hot water.

Seeing that there was only one thing Tobio could say.

"……Cup ramen in the morning, huh."

Tobio would never have subsisted on ready-made food and junk food if given a choice. Since his grandmother had died, the daily three meals she had once so accurately prepared with excellent balance had become something he could no longer experience. Yet for there to be a case the likes of not being able to prepare proper food, discounting when he was out associating with friends or running an important errand, such a thing had never happened. However, when he was cooking alone after his grandmother died, before he began receiving food prepared by his childhood friend Sae, he had become much too familiar with such poor prepackaged meals.

As the two girls, showing no particular mind, began pouring the hot water, Tobio addressed the two of them while standing.

“Incidentally, I had brought some canned goods and some spices when I was leaving my house. I’m also capable of cooking them. So, errr, what ingredients do you two have that I’m lacking?”

Hearing Tobio’s——no, a young man’s declaration about unexpected food, Natsume was flabbergasted——

“Y-yeah, in the supply room there’s some bread and some milk, and there should be some eggs.”

——She answered so.

“The supply room is jointly available to all the residents living here. There should be some ingredients you can use in the refrigerator that’s in there.”

From Lavinia who’d raised her hand, he had received excellent information.

“I understand. Then would you just wait 20 minutes? I’ll just prepare breakfast.”

Telling the two of them that with a smile, Tobio went to collect the ingredients.

——20 minutes later.

Lined up on the table, the menu consisted of a plastic cup filled with vegetables sticks dipped in mayonnaise, tuna sandwiches, and French toast garnished with jam for desert.

Seeing this, the openly fascinated Natsume clamored, “Amazing, amazing!” Lavinia’s facial expression appeared to remain unchanged, but her eyes were glued to the French toast.

Tobio spoke while folding the apron.

“My apologies, both the tuna sandwiches and the French toast overlap in their use of bread, although for the time being, I was able to prepare this meal that has an impression of being makeshift.”

Given the state of affairs, in order to get the girls to eat it, Tobio had prepared something that was only a bit tastier, supplying a menu that was simple and could be eaten quickly.

But, Natsume, the girl in question, seized Tobio’s and hand and rapidly shook it up and down in extreme delight.

“It’s amazing, Ikuse-kun! Well, surely, I had no idea you were the kind of young man who can cook! Iya—, I may have come across a good bargain.”

……Bargain, huh. Tobio was a little troubled by that response, but, since things seemed to have ended pleasantly, he thought that there must have been a good meaning behind it.

Lavinia, who had started eating, let out “Ottimo” from her mouth as she chewed.

Ottimo——it’s the Italian word for “delicious”. Based upon that, would that mean Lavinia is from Italy? Speaking of which, Tobio recalled there being a famous Italian painter with the same name as Lavinia.

“Since the cup noodles have already had the lid removed, I’ll take it up to Vaa-kun afterwards.”

Lavinia says so while looking at the container of cup noodles.

“Vaa-kun?”

Tobio posed a question having heard an unfamiliar name. Natsume let out a sigh.

“……He’s the cheeky brat who lives in this apartment building I mentioned last night. The reason we have been eating only cup noodles, that child is the one who gave us those cup noodles. He’s going through

a much too unhealthy growth period. But now we are being treated entirely to Ikuse-kun's cuisine."

……One can't help but wonder, what kind of people reside in this apartment complex? This better than expected response had Tobio feeling just a bit nervous.

Natsume began eating from the meal Tobio had finished preparing.

"Well then, in regards to today's plans, we are going to meet up with Samejima-kun as I explained last night."

"That's fine, but do we know where he is? Or else, perhaps, have you contacted him and he's coming back here?"

In response to Tobio's question, Natsume took out her phone.

"Contacting him……is no good. Just in case, I did make certain to force Samejima-kun to input his number, but I can never get through because he never seems to turn it on. I can't help but wonder if he didn't just provide me with a fake number."

Or perhaps he's ignoring all phone calls. In other words, there's no way to contact him from here. The result, he apparently does whatever he wants without anyone else knowing about it.

Then, that would mean Samejima Kouki's whereabouts were completely unknown. Does that mean that the Utsusemi already……. Even though the worst assumptions suppositions were emerging within Tobio, Lavinia said.

"It's okay. Since I placed my magical equation marking on Shark, his position can be specified."

Natsume's voice cried out, "As one would expect from a magical girl." Until recently, Tobio would have furrowed his eyebrows at anyone professing to be a "magical girl".

Lavinia produced a small wooden stick from her breast pocket, which began to emit a blue light from its tip.

Words failed Tobio with this phenomenon. As much as he would like to believe that the light on the end of the stick was some kind of trick, bearing in mind the circumstances around him it didn't necessarily seem that this so-called magical girl was a practical joke.

Lavinia immediately stood up, and rotated around once. Thereupon, the stick was observed to emit much more light when pointed in a specific direction.

While pointing in that direction, Lavinia spoke.

"Shark is over there in this direction. However, it was a somewhat bad reaction. Probably, it's a place that's difficult for my magic to reach……perhaps the enemy has set up a force field that I don't know how to penetrate."

Hearing that Natsume inquired.

"In other words, Samejima-kun charged into someplace alone against swarms of enemies?"

Lavinia nods in silence. Natsume wore an abject look on her face.

"……That Yankee, becoming so engrossed with defeating the enemy, he probably just went straight into the opposing encampment without invitation, didn't he……!"

Natsume, while grinding her teeth, had trembling fists. While wearing a half smile, her eyes had changed to a look of rage. She headed towards the entryway while making especially noisy footsteps.

"I'll get that Samejima Kouki! In spite of our combat readiness, that's no reason to leave him out there alone!"

Linking up with Samejima——. It meant the resumption of battle against the Utsusemi——our classmates.

Part 2

Having left the apartment building hideout, when they had arrived downtown, Minagawa Natsume handed Tobio a single micro SD card.

“That contains certain data that was prepared by the ‘Governor General’. The app can be freely installed by inserting the card into a mobile phone. Quickly now.”

While being rushed by her, Tobio took out his own mobile phone. It was still powered off from the previous night. Having received Natsume’s explanation about not contacting the police, and there being no benefit to involving anyone else, he had voluntarily turned his mobile off.

……Had he left it on, and he were to receive a call from a friend, he wouldn’t be able to say anything with his current mental state. From this day and for the foreseeable future, he was unable to attend school. He had no expectations of attending. This was in order to not involve any of the current students, since it seems like there was a high probability of them being caught up with the enemy if he were to go to school. Until this incident was resolved, he could not return to his usual routine.

The moment he inserted the card he’d received from Natsume into his mobile phone, it began installing automatically, and the app booted up.

Photos of young people appeared on the screen. It was a photo roster of the two hundred thirty-three students who had become Utsusemi.

“For the sake of future countermeasures, there’s nothing to lose by memorizing the faces of our opponents.”

Natsume said so.

People he knew, people he didn’t know, they were all displayed successively on the screen.

——There were also many unfamiliar fellow students.

Among the two hundred thirty-three Ryoukou High School second year students who had become Utsusemi, there were classmates of his he was familiar with, and there were those from other classes that he knew by appearance alone. But the majority were people who he could not match a name to their faces.

That was how it was. Since he wasn't a teacher, such a thing as matching all the names and faces of his fellow students was something he was unable to do.

However, he was thankful for this app. When the time came, it would serve as a reference. When it came to those who appeared to be strange suspicious people, if they can be permitted to approach them, they could then be able to make a good assessment.

Lavinia was making the tip of the stick glow. If one were to see such a spectacle downtown, with her wearing a pointed hat, they would think it was a blonde girl cosplaying with a glowing toy stick and donning a cloak. In order to avoid additional unwanted attention, they found a taxi on the way with Lavinia's guidance, hastening to their destination.

Would the black puppy be able to ride in the car, he had worried, but the puppy that had been with him just a moment earlier had disappeared without him being aware. Noticing its disappearance Natsume said.

"That seems to be how our partners are. Incidentally, taking Griffon-chan for instance, I expect he's flying up in the sky by now."

She cheerfully replied in such a way. According to her, fundamentally the Sacred Gear hatched from the egg——the puppy and Natsume's Griffon differ from the Utsusemi of their fellow students in that people who are unrelated, from their perspective, remain unaware of their existence. They will also become visible to other people if the possessor wishes for them to perceive them. So long as he doesn't desire for them to see the puppy, they won't be able to see it unless Tobio authorizes them to do so, Natsume explained.

The puppy had been trotting after him since he left his house. Having escorted him up until the moment the taxi left, the puppy had obstinately refused to be separated from Tobio.

That was the sort of existence they were, these so called independent-avatar type Sacred Gears. For those who are unrelated, their existence is unrecognizable——. However, when the possessor is in a pinch they will without fail come running when called upon.

Natsume unexpectedly spoke.

"It might be good if you were to give it a name. For when you wish to call it, since I think it'd be inconvenient if there's no name."

……A name, huh. Due to all that had occurred since the previous night, he hadn't considered such a thing until now. ……This black puppy, in spite of being a supernatural power of his, it has its own will, so a name may very well be necessary.

Riding in the taxi, Tobio watched the scenery outside as he gave thought to the various issues on the matter of the dog, a matter that'd be ongoing from this point forward.

Riding in the cab, while being concerned of being targeted by the Utsusemi, they made good progress during the day, with the taxi having passed through two towns peacefully. After they arrived at the entrance to a public park, they began the search for Samejima Kouki with Lavinia's guidance. On the way, they were vigilant of every resident they happened to meet though none of them seemed to be Utsusemi, since in general none of them appeared to be close to student age. Naturally though, it's not possible to be certain. Now though, students should be in the middle of classes at this time. If a student were to be seen by themselves in a residential area at this time of day it seems they'd be quite conspicuous.

Continuing to progress, the three of them arrived——at an out of business department store at the edge of the residential area. The story of how this department store had gone out of business had reached even

Tobio's ear. Having been beaten out by an aggressive shopping mall in the next town, the neighborhood was considering having it demolished. It had been decided that a comprehensive sports gym equipped with an indoor pool would be built on the site.

Tobio and Natsume prepared themselves in front of the deserted department store. Presently, it was nothing other than a dangerous place, in spite where it was established. At any rate, with the interior of the building being devoid of any signs of life, the conditions were just about the worst for being attacked by the Utsusemi.

Nevertheless, even an amateur could see that the light from Lavinia's stick was glaringly shining in the direction of the department store's interior. ……It would seem Samejima Kouki is inside.

Having determined what this meant, Natsume spoke.

"I wouldn't be strange at all if this place has become a den of Utsusemi."

The black puppy that had been gone had also imperceptibly reappeared at his feet. ……In other words, that would seem to be the situation. Since there was a high likelihood of the master's body being at risk——. To an extent, it exists within said body and was called upon by current situation. Considering the scale of the department store, it was impossible to know if perhaps the number of Utsusemi who had broken in isn't just one or two people.

"Let us enter."

Without showing particular hesitation, Lavinia did so while facing behind at them invitingly. It was not possible to enter through the front gate due to the shutter being lowered. Since Samejima was currently inside, one would wonder from where he gained entry. Tobio pondered whether the staff use entrance might be open.

The three of them sought out the staff entrance.

"In any event, it sure is gloomy……"

Natsume's murmuring in a low whisper resounded lightly through the store's interior.

After that, they had discovered the entrance by going around back. As expected, the staff-use gate had been forcibly wrenched open by someone, making it easy to trespass.

Within the department store, it was naturally unilluminated, since after all the shutters had been closed, so the store's interior was nearly pitch dark. Natsume produced two pencil lights from inside her bag, and passed one in his direction. Since the tip of Lavinia's stick was shining, she didn't seem to need a light.

The trio advanced through the first floor while keeping a set distance from each other. Natsume spoke in a whispering voice such that Lavinia could hear but which the enemy would probably not be able to detect.

(……That Yankee, which floor is he on?)

(I do not know. Due to the force field making it difficult to utilize my magic here, there's somewhat of a restraint on the marking I placed on Shark. However, I'm positive he's in here.)

As she declared that, the light from the tip of her stick repeatedly flickered irregularly. It seemed there was something inside this department store which was having an adverse effect on Lavinia's supposed ability to use magic.

Natsume quietly whispered a suggestion.

(Let's search floor by floor. It would be troublesome if we rushed up to the top and happened upon a large crowd of people. Lavinia, can you use some kind of communication magic?)

Lavinia nodded to Natsume's query, and drew something in the air with her stick. Together with the movement of the stick a circle was emitted from the light at the tip. Moreover, strange characters were inscribed in the circle's design, forming a small magic square that had appeared before their eyes.

……It seemed similar to the kind of magic square that appeared whenever the Utsusemi vanished……no, there seemed to be a difference in the design. When the small magic square vanished, there were glowing crystals about the size of a grain of rice floating in the air. The glowing crystals started moving on their own, entering the ears of Lavinia, Natsume, and himself. Tobio was scared by the abrupt occurrence involving his body……especially since it had gone into his ear.

While accidentally letting out a small chuckle at Tobio's reaction, Natsume whispered while holding her ear with her hand.

'(Can you hear me?)'

——!! At the same time as Natsume's voice was heard from in front of him, Tobio was shocked to also hear it directly from inside his ear.

(By holding your ear your voice will be transmitted to us. This is one of Lavinia's magical spells.)

…….Such an impossible remark. The slightly proud Lavinia was next to her making a peace sign, but magic——supernatural phenomenon truly does exist…… Was that combustion phenomenon also real magic then? ……However, one must wonder whether he should be so surprised at this late hour. After all, he had been continuously confronted with such phenomenon since last night——.

……If that's the case, then is there also a magician involved with the magic square that shows up when the Utsusemi vanished? Just like how Lavinia was assisting them, by any chance, could that the cause of it? Although such varied guesses circulated Tobio's thoughts, for now the search for Samejima was most urgent, so he left behind such references to Lavinia until after this was resolved. ……It would be good to ask after they have once again returned alive from this place.

Natsume utters a confirmation.

(We'll temporarily split up to search. We go one floor at a time. We'll each attempt to contact the others when we reach the second floor, and

we'll decide from there. However, should you find Samejima-kun, contact the rest of us in due course afterwards.

Nodding their accent, the trio temporarily distanced themselves to begin the search.

Walking through the interior of the closed department store that was completely devoid of people, Tobio's heart was beating ominously. From the interior of each shop every piece of merchandise had been removed, leaving only plastic sheets and ladders inside for demolition use, with not a single forgotten shelf of merchandise to be found. This was a blessing in the sense that there were only a limited number of places to hide.

……With classes having ended, that those who had left school weren't present brought such eeriness, as did the lack of anything befitting a department store that people would want. Furthermore, within this building, there were fellow classmates accompanied by monsters like those that had been attacking them last night. This was something that Tobio found hard to endure considering that he'd been an ordinary high school student until yesterday.

Nevertheless he was somehow able to temporarily maintain a strong will, with the mighty existence of the black puppy trotting along earlier helping him to not lose his mind in this situation. A sharp protuberance was coming from the dog's head——a blade like object was growing there, it having already had done something similar to making good preparations for battle.

……What had enabled him to gain this strong will, when he had previously been so terrified, was nothing other than believing in the rescue of his fellow classmates——and reuniting with Sae.

If it's the case that Sae would be there from now on——.

Tobio found strength in that thought alone, resisting his fear as he advanced forward.

'Anything over there?'

The voice of Natsume was heard directly in his ear. Tobio also whispered while holding his ear.

(Nothing in particular. What about on your end?)

'Still nothing. Although Griffon went ahead earlier, nothing in particular has shown up.'

……So when it comes to the first floor, there is nothing of particular interest?

Where Tobio had now arrived, there was an escalator that was stopped. Should he ascend from here? Or perhaps it would be better to take the stairs. The decision was that they would all link up——this was the main thing to consider.

The puppy sensed something and started staring at a specific point. Tobio gulped as he aimed the penlight in that direction. What the puppy was staring at, was a pillar. ……Was there something hiding behind it? Even with the light he couldn't make out anything, so perhaps it was prudent to gather the others at least temporarily.

From behind the pillar, a single white cat appears. The cat had a pure white coat. Its long tail was swaying from side to side.

……A stray cat that had entered the department store? ——However, he immediately revised that thought. The Utsusemi those guys possess, those are monsters that imitate the form of animals. If one accepts that, then this cat as well is……?

As Tobio was tensing up, there was the shape of another silhouette that then appeared from behind the pillar. Exposed by the penlight, there was a tall youth with dyed brown hair.

——It was Samejima Kouki.

The youth——Samejima lowered his gaze while using his hand to protect his eyes from the light shining from the penlight. He seemed to be looking at a mobile phone. The puppy was also staring at the cat

accompanying him while not moving an inch. Just a little, Samejima sighed.

"……It would seem that this guy doesn't resemble those on the list. So, is he from the group of survivors? Geez, that such a kid would come to place like this."

Samejima gave such a complaint while grabbing the back of his head with his large hand.

With them mutually no longer posing a threat to each other, Samejima spoke.

"You there, did you come here together with Natsume and that witch girl?"

"……Yes, they're also searching the first floor."

"……The one who grasped my movements—, that would be that witch girl, or else that conceited silver haired son of bitch determined where I was. ……Geez, even though they said I could do as I pleased for the time being. I finally seized upon a clue to the mastermind behind everything—and now this."

Samejima cursed as he spoke.

——Then, Samejima directed his gaze towards the escalator ahead as though noticing something. Similarly, the white cat and black puppy stared in the same direction. Tobio was also prompted to gaze in that direction……he wasn't able to make out anything in the darkness, but the feeling that something was there persisted.

"……As I suspected, there does seem to be something here."

Samejima was glaring at the escalator in front of them.

"Identifying such a presence, it would be good of you to memorize how to do it. By sharpening your senses with the sacred treasure, even an amateur at fighting should be able to memorize it instantly."

Samejima spoke as such as he moved to Tobio's side, facing towards the escalator. Having found Samejima, he had thought of going up to the second floor to report to Natsume and company——but at that moment he heard the girls' voices in his ear. Simultaneously a large sound echoed through the first floor.

'Ikuse-kun! Sorry! I've been attacked! Lavinia and I are supporting each other right now! Is it the same over there!?'

Attacked!? The opponents had suddenly appeared on the first floor! They must have come down the stairs from up top.

Holding his ear, Tobio spoke to Natsume and company.

"I found Samejima Kouki over here! Is there anything we can do!? Should I head over to you bringing Samejima!?"

At this suggestion Tobio had made, Samejima only chuckled.

"So it seems the witch girl is there? If that's the case, shouldn't there be little reason to worry about that birdbrain? It's too bad, but they'll have to wait for me to finish my business upstairs."

Saying that, Samejima picked up the white cat, placed it on his shoulder, and proceeded to ascend the escalator.

"Oy!"

As Tobio tried to call him back, Natsume's voice was transmitted.

'Ikuse-kun! That voice just now, was that Samejima-kun? In any case, please go after him for me!'

"But! Are you truly alright over there?"

'Don't be putting down my Griffon-chan. Besides these run of the mill Utsusemi opponents can't resist the magical girl over here.'

At that moment, there was a crashing sound heard from the interior accompanied by a flash of red light gleaming in the darkness.

As Natsume had said, Lavinia had instantly defeated the monster with the Ustusemi last night with that combustion phenomenon. Even the pair of Natsume and Samejima shouldn't be a cause for such concern, he thought, because that's just how powerful they are.

"……My bad! I will follow Samejima! You absolutely cannot die on me, Minagawa-chan! Lavinia-chan!"

'Understood!'

'It is understood.'

The spirited reply of the two girls reaches his ears. Though there was a desire to go to where the girls were……Tobio shook it off and proceeded up the escalator in pursuit of Samejima.

Ascending to the second floor, they immediately discovered the lights were on. The sudden brightness dazzled Tobio and Samejima. But thanks to the light, the entire floor was visible to them.

And then, waiting for them on the second floor——were gigantic monsters. A mantis, a stag beetle, a crab, a turtle, a herd of monster with appearances similar to such things——. There were also varieties of the frog and spider he'd fought last night. Beside them were boys and girls. It was the Utsusemi who were their fellow classmates. From a glance there were roughly no more than ten people spread out before them.

……In this single case on his second day of being involved in such experiences, he really shouldn't have to face so many opponents.

For Tobio, this first taste of this amount of violence sent chills down his spine.

——However, that guy went "Kukuku" in amusement, wearing a fearless smile.

Samejima, without hesitation, advanced step by step towards the enemy line.

“Byakusa, let’s go.”

This he said to the cat sitting on his shoulder. Thereupon, the cat’s long tail stood up straight like a pin——and then split in two. The two split ends of the tail steadily extended, one of them wrapping around Samejima’s left arm. The white tail that was wrapping itself around its master’s arm began to steadily change its shape——it transformed into an enormous cone shaped lance.

“——My cat’s lance can pierce anything. Come now, come and be pierced by this guy.”

With the lance that had grown on his left arm, Samejima issued a declaration of war to the Utsusemi.

Right after that starting signal for the outbreak of war, the spider monster charges from the front. By lowering his posture, he pierced the spider monster with his left arm’s lance by bringing the upper point to an extremely low altitude!

Samejima lifted the spider he had pierced and held it above his head in the air, and then swung his lance down tossing towards the enemy as though discarding it! At that moment the annihilated spider was released from the lance and was sent flying forwards! The monsters dispersed from the spot. Samejima turned to the crab that was attacking from his right, and with his right hand signals directions to the cat.

“Aim at the gaps in the hard shell!”

One of the white cat’s two tails windingly stirred, and shot out at high speed! The crab monster was unable to avoid as a part of its shell completely gave way to the blow from the tail! The white tail was like a thin sharp rapier, having pierced the body of the crab, and was preventing the opponent from moving. The tail was moving freely, having previously pierced its body, and Tobio understood that it was destroying the nucleus. Samejima’s lance, with the cat’s manipulation of the sharp thin tail, bore into it. Samejima and the cat had matched their breathing in order to unleash two attacks.

——And, at this time, a monster was coming to attack Tobio. Just like last night, the frog monster, its tongue dripping, was leaping at him. Tobio pointed his right hand in the frog's direction, and sent an order to the black dog. The puppy rushed out at a speed the eye couldn't catch, charging through the frog with the blade on its forehead bisecting it.

Seeing this scene Samejima *Huuu* let out a complimentary whistle.

Subsequently, Samejima evaded the mantis's twin arm blades while piercing its abdomen with the lance, then jumped to evade the charge of the stag beetle that was flying low to the ground.

"——Nja, here!"

He aimed the lance downwards using the energy of his jump, and thrust into the stag beetle from above. He then extracted the lance which had pierced through the floor of the second story and respectively mowed down the beetle horizontally. The stag beetle monster whose appearance had completely changed from the force was left discarded upon the floor.

Off to the side, Tobio was also cleaning up a monster's body. In this situation, Tobio truly felt the power.

——Fight! Win!

Even though this was still only his second day since plunging into this strange world, the puppy's power was the real thing. And then, the power of Samejima beside him was overwhelming the other Utsusemi.

……This is, could this be the difference between genuine Sacred Gears and artificial ones? Thinking in such a manner, Tobio and Samejima, naturally, effortlessly avoided taking even a single blow. The Sacred Gears themselves, it seemed, exhibited greater power than user would have assumed.

And yet, there was an opponent Samejima's attack couldn't penetrate. It was a turtle monster. Its hard shell repelled his lance. The turtle monster was focusing on defense by hiding its head and limbs inside its shell.

Samejima was clicking his tongue. ——But, the puppy jumped in unconcerned.

How sharp would the dog's blade have to be cause harm to that shell——.

But the dog's behavior exceeded Tobio's expectations. It used the blade that had grown to assault the spot where the head had previously retracted.

Approaching the spot where the head had previously retracted——it pushed the extending blade from its forehead forward. Although the turtle had hidden within its shell, the part where the head had been retracted was not covered by the hard shell. Making use of the blade, the dog aimed there. The sharp blade extended, skewering the turtle monster that had withdrawn into its shell. From the pointed end of the turtle's head that was hidden in the shell, it pierced straight through to its tail. The turtle's life had been ended.

"If attacking the shell is no good, attack where there is no shell. Didn't I do something similar with Byakusa?"

Samejima commented as such. Indeed, when the white cat defeated the crab, it did so by targeting the gap in its hard shell. ……Having seen that, did the black puppy immediately learn such a thing? Assuming that's the case, it can be determined that the puppy's intelligence is higher than he had thought.

Two people came up to the second floor, and completed their first battle in just a few minutes——.

Ten Utsusemi had been completely annihilated. The fellow classmates whose monsters were defeated collapsed on the spot after losing consciousness. While ensuring that all the fellow classmates were vanishing through the magic square, Samejima enquired of Tobio.

"There's one thing I'd like to ask."

Tobio nodded in silence.

“When you came here did you suppress your desire to flee? What for? For what incomprehensible reason, born from some absolutely ridiculous silly ideal that fills your mind, did you chose to act? What is your motivation for fighting? That dog, what is it that you see when you fight with it?”

In front of Samejima’s gaze, the black puppy’s eyes were emitting a fiery red glow. Something so powerful that it would likely stimulate one’s courage.

Being questioned by Samejima, Tobio looked at the ceiling.

“……I’m also scared. But——“

Looking ahead Tobio spoke to Samejima.

“They’re people I wish to save no matter the cost. Friends I want to help no matter the cost. ……Even if I’m the only one with the power to fight, then I will die standing up.”

Hearing that, Samejima for the first time softened his normally aggressive expression and showed his emotions.

“……Heh. Seems you’re not just some ordinary indecisive person.”

Samejima turned his feet towards the escalator and began ascending to the third floor. Tobio also followed in due course.

As the two of them were climbing the escalator, Samejima inquired without looking back.

“……A woman is it?”

That single word came as a complete surprise. Even though Tobio had only spoken of “people I wish to save”, Samejima had apparently seen through that.

As a result of it being comprehended, Tobio became flustered while his face turned red.

“Eh! N-no, that’s……”

Samejima laughed as Tobio spoke while stuttering.

“Haha, a woman, huh. Isn’t that great. Putting on such strange airs of justice, that’s quite good.”

Looking back, Samejima extended his hand.

“I’m Samejima Kouki.”

Tobio, in spite of his surprise, immediately reached out and accepted the handshake.

“Ikuse Tobio, I'll be in your care.”

This was Ryoukou High School’s former number one delinquent——Samejima Kouki. But, it seemed that he was a much more decent guy than rumored.

Chapter 3 Conclusion – Companion/Fourth Person

Part 2 (Continued)

Ascending through the second floor, and again through the third, they then finally reached the fourth floor.

Whereupon, waiting for them——was a swarm of Utsusemi, surely no fewer than thirty of them. There were all sort of varieties of grotesque monsters, all glaring at them with an ominous glint in their eyes. Being watched by no fewer than thirty monsters like that was quite simply an astounding spectacle. It was his first time seeing something with a body that seemed similar to a gigantic plant.

Samejima’s sight was focused on a single point. Tobio followed his gaze, and there was the figure of a man who was obviously out-of-place.

It was a man in the latter half of his twenties wearing a business suit.

While showing a fearless smile, the man approached. He spoke while wearing a sarcastic smile.

"Yah, this is all there is. Only two people. Or else, is there some third person down below as well?"

Samejima asks in a threatening tone.

"……The mastermind?"

"——You could say that I am one of them. I am called Doumon Kazuhisa. I am someone who is participating in the current 'Four Fiends Project'. Since it seemed fun, I came to inspect this scene."

"……Four Fiends? Wha's that?"

Samejima asks again regarding the phrase that Tobio as well had never heard before. ……'Four Fiends Project'?

Seeing that reaction, the man then put on a puzzled expression.

"Hou, did that one from the 'Grigori[6]', as usual, not yet mention that? Well, good."

The man beckoned with his finger. ——At that moment, the monsters that had been on standby behind the man simultaneously began to move.

The man who had called himself Doumon spread his hands, as he spoke to Tobio and company.

"In any case, I will be taking you guys back with me. Since we are in need of the cat and dog you guys carry. The 'Utsusemi' and such, that was no more than a minor experiment for the sake of this."

[6] *Kanji:Gang of Fallen Angels*

Despite hearing that, Samejima, without backing away at all from the situation, boldly spoke up.

“The genuine sacred treasures——the Sacred something or other was it? You involved them in this for such an incomprehensible reason. Since this is a good chance, why don’t you release my pal?”

“For sure, your friend was the experimental body called Maeda Nobushige I believe. Yeah, he has been changed into an Utsusemi.”

With those few words, Samejima’s expression became one of rage. Tobio was struck a feeling of unusually intense fighting spirit from beside him.

Tobio had a memory of that name. Maeda should have been one of the few comrades of Samejima. Often, he would catch sight of the two of them hanging out at Ryoukou High School.

“In that case, let me reply like this. I’m going pummel you, you damn bastard!”

Again the lance forms on Samejima’s left arm. He was at full combat readiness.

“Truly, how vulgar.”

The man immediately spat such words from his mouth.

Taking a stance, Samejima inquires of Tobio.

“……Have birdbrain and the witch girl not come up yet? This guy will likely be difficult despite all the trouble spent trying to capture the mastermind.”

With a nod Tobio held his ear and began to question those two.

“Minagawa-san, Lavinia-san, how are things over there? We’re battling with a large crowd upstairs here.”

Such was his report, but what was heard was Natsume’s frantic voice.

'Here as well, we're caught up in the middle of hostilities with Utsusemi invading from outside and can't get away! In spite of Lavinia both burning and paralyzing them there's no end to it. I'd say, perhaps, about forty of them are approaching.'

——Forty! That's not much different than here, not at all!

It seemed there was a fierce battle on the first floor as well.

'If it has become like this, I will just "freeze" them then.'

'Th-that's to done as a last resort. This whole place might become frozen over I would think. This! Demise Girl[7]!'

Something that appeared to be a trump card……though it seemed that nothing had changed as reinforcements would not be arriving at their location.

"……Understood, we will persevere at least so that we will not die here."

'Eeh, us as well, we will survive.'

Having been listening to this communication going on beside him, Samejima smiled bitterly.

"……Well, that's just like birdbrain, so unreasonable. Goodness, just doing what must be done to attain victory would be good."

Samejima spoke to Tobio.

"That bastard called Doumon or whatnot must not be allowed to get away, since I have various questions about this case for him."

"Yeah, I know."

[7] *The Kanji here reads 'Indiscriminate Ice Princess' while Demise Girl is written in Katakana above. This is a somewhat common format in Japanese. In DxD, most Sacred Gears, Balance Breakers, and such have both a Japanese and English name.*

The two of them having confirmed to that extent with each other, each of them took a step forward with their partner——the puppy and the cat. Additionally the large crowd of Utsusemi began to move in response. The forms of the monsters began making agile movements. Assaulting the figures from the front, the black puppy and Samejima's lance cut down gigantic centipede and grasshopper monsters, piercing them to death. This was easily accomplished with only a simple charge at the opposing party. ——However, for the type that extends things like ivy or tentacles to engage from a distance such an approach was not very good. Ultimately, this meant that Tobio and Samejima were not able to deal with opponents that were anything other than short to mid-range.

In order to advance the two had no choice but to cut through the tentacles of the reptile types and the ivy of the plant types. This promised to be a hard fight since it seemed to be inevitable that an arm or a leg would get entangled even once. As they scrupulously took care to clear the way, Tobio's puppy and Samejima wielding the lance severed each of them one by one.

The duo were feeling puzzled. Why didn't they gather all of that large number of people together and attack all at once? Only a group of about four from the numerous opponents would attack at once…….Samejima aside, for Tobio who had possessed his awakened powers only for yesterday and today, it would probably be possible to subdue him if about ten people attacked him at once, yet those guys made no attempt to do so whatsoever.

The reason——was apparently due to that man named Doumon. The man, his hand on his chin, was directing his gaze towards them seeming very interested. Without any exaggeration he would issue instructions to the Utsusemi, simply directing them with just a few tiny moves with his index finger. Seeing that Tobio arrived at a single conclusion.

Most likely, Doumon is observing the direction of the battle. Purposefully, he was only dispatching a set number of Utsusemi, all so that he can experience watching the development.

Like Tobio, Samejima it seemed was also suspecting the same, as he clicked his tongue.

"……Being a spectator is he? That's a good social status. ——A total waste!"

Doumon's behavior it seemed had had dangerously affected Samjima's mood.

It was just as Tobio and Samejima had defeated a wasp and dragonfly monsters that had come flying in. While nodding his head at that moment, Doumon inserted his hand into his breast pocket.

"Yes yes, it's become clear. As before, the genuine ones are different. I have become aware of the fact that continuing to display the difference with the artificial ones is seemingly unnecessary. Particularly, the condition with which Samejima Kouki handles his sacred treasure is top notch. As one would expect of the one who carries one part of the 'Four Fiends'. ——That is to say, shall we switch things up next?"

What the man took out——were several scraps of paper similar to talismans. These objects, which had magical characters written on them, were something for which Tobio knew nothing of their significance. With the talismans in his hand, Doumon began muttering something like a spell in an undertone.

"……That which is born out of earth, whose spirit was cast out of iron, by means of water purified, hasten forth before me."

The man released the talismans——and the talismans drifted through the air as though possessing a will, taking the form of a pentagram. After all the talismans gave off an ominous radiance, a large shadow was born on the floor. The shadow bulged forth, taking on a visage.

……What had appeared before Tobio and Samejima, was a seemingly three meter tall human-like mass of clay. It was so tall that it head was close to hitting the ceiling. Like a faceless ghost it had neither eyes, nose, mouth, nor ears, and simply the sight of the arms that were nearly as thick as telephone poles filled one with a chilling sensation.

Doumon laughed.

“This, though, is my family’s prized lineage. Come now, my clay doll will capture you.”

Responding to the man who then snapped his fingers, the clay doll slowly came to life.

While taking a stance with the lance, Samejima spat out in response.

“……It’s good enough for that witch girl’s magic, it’s good enough for the monsters summoned by a little shit like you, and it’s certainly alright for this.”

“Nevertheless, if they were to be compared, that which you guys possess might as well miniscule. Truly, such an unpleasant state of affairs.”

The clay doll sent out a large punch. The force of it caused the air to vibrate. A direct hit——no, even being just grazed by such an attack would cause massive damage. Samejima jumps back to take some distance, and then immediately thrusts with the lance. ——However, only a dry note reverberated off the floor, the lance having been completely repelled by the clay doll’s body. It seemed to be the case that the hardness of the clay doll exceeded the offensive ability of the lance Samejima possessed. At this point the black puppy slashed at it with a pair of blades it had grown from its back like wings——but only that same dry note was produced as it seemed have not inflicted any damage on the clay doll.

Seeing that result Doumon sneered.

“As it would seem, presently my doll is surpassing you. ——Well then, shall we finish this.”

The man, once again, uttered a spell while producing talismans. The talismans flew through the air, spreading out behind Tobio and Samejima to summon a second clay doll. Reinforcements had appeared

at their back. From the front the clay doll from before was also approaching.

"……Asshole!"

"……Kuu."

Before long, Tobio and Samejima were being completely subdued by the clay doll——.

"Well then, how should we do this?"

Due to Doumon's clay doll, Tobio and Samejima had been subdued on the floor. The clay doll was pinning Tobio with its right arm and Samejima with its left arm respectively. Tobio could feel the atrocious power being given off by the arm of the clay doll that was pinning him. He was able to understand from this that he couldn't slip out using only his own strength. The puppy and the cat were now being held in the hands of the other clay doll, snatching away any chance of freedom.

Doumon again stroked his jaw with his hand, calmly pondering something as he looked at a handheld mobile device. The hand operating the mobile device stopped moving. Sending a repulsed look at Tobio, he said this.

"Right, it would seem you were leading that person to the vicinity of this place."

The man told the Utsusemi on standby behind him.

"Get going before that person following from behind gets here."

Thereupon, from those at the front of the group behind him came several people who could not be identified.

——!!

A friend of Tobio was among them.

"……Sasaki?"

Indeed, it was the friend that he had reunited with yesterday. On that occasion, when the lizard monster he had been leading was slain, the magic square transported him away……. Sasaki was once again leading the lizard monster at this place as part of the group.

Doumon spoke.

“Yesterday, this child was defeated by you, right. However, with the technology here, we are able to resurrect them with even a single body part. It would be impossible if it had been the child as well that was slain, but it was his good fortune that his case was the type where resurrection was possible. Therefore, he is once again able to lead his partner.”

……Rather than the description of Doumon, Tobio was experiencing a confused mental state due to once again encountering the figure of his friend.

“Stop it Sasaki! It’s me, it’s Ikuse!”

That time he wasn’t able to——. Tobio desperately appealed to him. However, Sasaki didn’t reply at all. He merely stood there expressionlessly.

Samejima frustratingly narrowed his eyes and said.

“……It’s useless. As long as you don’t take down the company manipulating these guys, they won’t fucking stop attacking.”

While Doumon was enjoying this reaction, he made Sasaki stand in front of the clay doll that was holding the puppy and cat. Doumon, his grip on Sasaki’s neck, made him draw even closer ahead. Just ahead——the puppy still had a sharp blade showing on its forehead.

“Still, I suppose you wouldn’t slay a human would you? What would happened if the ‘Four Fiends’ that serve as your sacred treasures were to memorize human blood, how could I not look forward to something so truly interesting?”

Speaking cheerfully the man's eyes——were dyed with insanity.

……He was going to murder Sasaki with the puppy's own body……!!

Tobio was left speechless by such startling conduct, yet he continued to struggle to slip free of the clay doll's hand. ——However, against such robust brute strength, Tobio couldn't even budge.

"……!!! You bastard, such a cowardly action……!!"

Samejima cried as he struggled the same way, but the man just let out a sigh.

"What are you saying? Speaking of the origin of all this, it's you guys who are at fault for not boarding that luxury liner. Well, I believe that it was that the Sacred Gears you possess sensed the peril and induced your fever. Moreover, as a result of the involvement of that annoying group of those who fell from heaven, we weren't even able to realize your abstentions beforehand. Thanks to that we weren't able to make drastic alterations to the plan. How dare they forestall us by manipulating information like that, those black winged people!"

The man completely switched to a bitter smile.

"Well, due to such reasons, it seems they are called the Grigori[8]. Fumu fumu, the Sacred Gear is a gift from God after all."

Sasaki was——looking his way, his mouth was shifting.

"Traitor."

"Sasaki……"

Heartrending emotions overwhelmed Tobio.

——Traitor.

[8] *Kanji:those who watch over the children of God*

That's right, if that was the case, then it seems he was a traitor. By not participating in that trip, he had gotten them involved. Having been thrown into this abnormal situation merely due to something so absurd, he had started fighting with his fellow students who were leaders of monsters.

Was this some kind of exception to treachery……!?

Suddenly Tobio's mind recalled a conversation scene he had with Sasaki before the trip.

After school, while returning home Sasaki spoke with an embarrassed mood.

'Say, Ikuse. I've been thinking, about conveying my feelings to Morose from class C on the upcoming school trip……'

Sasaki would often speak of the issue with Morose. Although Tobio was ignorant when it came to romance, he was at the very least aware that Sasaki yearned for her. Sasaki thumped Tobio of the back.

'Supposing I get completely rejected, you'll definitely be there to console me! Please I beg you!'

An ordinary student. Sasaki was just an ordinary senior high school student.

He would study, he would exercise, he laughed, he got angry, he cried, he loved. Yet all of this was typical for a young senior high school student.

As Doumon was bringing Sasaki close to the puppy's blade, Sasaki let out a muffled voice.

"……I……kuse……"

——! ……That was, his name…..?

While still expressionless, Sasaki was shedding tears.

"……He……elp……"

He shouldn't have been conscious. His fellow students——his classmates had all been remade into beings that simply commanded monsters. Even just earlier, they had come at him trying to kill him. Because right now, his consciousness was stolen, and was functioning under the control of Doumon and his group.

And yet, Sasaki had……called out his name. He'd asked for help.

Due to this occurrence, Tobio——had tears pouring down his cheek.

Seeing this series of events, Doumon began trembling.

"This is……magnificent! So he was still partially conscious to this extent! This is quite interesting! Seize them, this absolutely must be immediately reported to the staff! Since the data on artificial Sacred Gears thus far is insufficient, obtaining something like this is valuable!"

……To the end, as this man regards them, Sasaki, the students of Ryoukou, they were nothing but objects to him……? How can it be that he should be capable of such cruelty? How could such an inhuman individual possibly exist?

"…….Don't fu…..!!"

Tobio——could not hold back his rage.

"Don't fuck with me……!! Why, why don't you bastards stop having Sasaki and the others assist with your research if they aren't any good……!?"

Doumon sneered.

"It's you guys who are at fault for not having participated. No, it would be that group of those who fell from heaven who concealed you. Due to that, since we couldn't contain ourselves, do you think we had any choice other than to resort to plan B? For said plan, naturally it was necessary to have an abundance of young people serve as experimental

bodies for the ‘Four Fiends Plan’. Their cooperation was entirely necessary.”

I don’t care. The way that things should be, they shouldn’t be involved! Because of them——they were unable to live ordinary lives! Even if they could receive that kind of power, not one of them would have asked for something like this! They should just be living life as always!

Recalling something, Doumon spoke with amusement.

“Ikuse…..huh. Aah, speaking of which, I’m sure there was data saying that you were intimate with Toujou Sae. That seems good, you should meet her. She’s become an excellent Utsusemi. I remember her!”

——Sae.

Having seen Tobio make react strongly when he heard that name, Doumon smiled even more offensively.

“She cried out so many times in the middle of the experiment. ‘Tobio, Tobio’——. In that way, she was calling out to you. I understood.”

…….

…….

Tobio, lacking any words to say——violently ground his molars, overflowing with frustration and anger, as tears endlessly poured down. His eyes glared at Doumon full of murderous intent.

……Aah, it’s like that huh.

……These guys……are so ‘evil’……!!

……These guys, there isn’t anything they wouldn’t do for their greed, whether it’s to me, to Sasaki, to Sae——they’ll do anything to satisfy their evil intentions.

——I won’t allow it.

I won't allow them to do as they please……!!

These shitty guys, I won't just let something like this be overlooked……!! To rescue Sasaki, his friends, Sae! These people, he would absolutely rescue the people important to him from their demonic hands.

It was at that moment. His mind recalled the words of Lavinia.

——The power of desire. The sacred treasure——Sacred Gears become strong from strong desires, responding to the possessor.

—— It is almost certain that that Doggy responded to Toby's strong desire.

He looked over at the black puppy that was being restrained.

Hey, you were born from my shadow. Can I lend you my feelings, my desires? For my sake can you become that [Blade]?

While the puppy was being restrained by the monsters, its red eyes began to shine red.

DOKUN…….

From within him something gently pulsed. There was a sense that he and the dog were connected, even stronger than it was last night.

In that case, for my sake, become that <<Blade>>——.

Kill those guys by becoming that <<Blade>>!

Something inside of Tobio vigorously burst open——.

——Kill. Kill kill kill kill kill kill kill kill!!

Completely annihilate those guys!!! Slaughter them!!!

“I’ll lend you my desiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiirrrrrrrrrrrrrrrreeeeeeeeeee!!! You will be my <<Blaaaaaaaaaaaaaaddddddddddddeeeeeeeeee>>!!”

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaaaaaaaaaaaddddddddddeeeeeeeeeee…….

The puppy responded to Tobio’s scream, which spread and resounded throughout the floor.

In an instant——something dark was produced from the puppy’s body, which then spread. It also came out of Tobio’s body finally enveloping the clay doll. Tobio slowly began to get up. Regarding the powerful strength of the arm of the clay doll that was restraining him, it was dissolved little by little, until at last he was released upon the gigantic arm’s destruction. This unbelievable power of his had originated from within his own body. Gradually swelling up within him, there was a feeling that it was completely consuming him. The number of pulsations kept increasing. Acting in concert the black puppy had grown countless blades from its body which had destroyed the arm of the clay doll.

Together Tobio and the puppy had been freed from their restraints, while Doumon who was ahead stood completely erect. Enveloping the bodies of Tobio and the dog, there was something like a black aura.

Tobio wasn’t affected by this ‘power’ from within himself——he was simply able to recognize how to use the ‘Blade’.

Extending his hand in front of him, Tobio muttered a few words.

“——Pierce, everything.”

Much more intensely than before the black aura enveloped the puppy’s body. An instant later, the Utsusemi on standby behind the man—— countless blades appeared from the shadows beneath the feet of the monsters accompanying them, successfully skewering them!

Looking over, by means of gigantic blades that were born from the shadows beneath their feet, the two clay dolls restraining Samejima and the white cat were vertically bisected.

Indeed, this was one ability of the puppy. The ability to deliver attacks from shadows. So long as it was within Tobio's field of vision, the puppy's blades could be grown from any shadow. This way of using the ability had just now appeared within Tobio's head.

"……Wh-what, what is this!? Blades from shadows!? Countless numbers of swords!? How can this be!?"

With such an intense scene Doumon was extremely confused, displaying such confusion by looking back and forth.

Tobio spoke while the puppy stood ready at his side.

"……It suddenly struck me, what your name should be."

Natsume had said it. It was necessary for their partners to have names. Tobio, at this moment, was certain as to which name to choose.

"——[Jin][9]. You're Jin. My blade for the sake of killing everything."

And so, this was the name he had generated for his other self——.

Tobio commanded the puppy——Jin.

"Jin, slash."

The puppy's blade rushed forward at what could be said to be god speed. The speed was so excessive that the monsters of the Utsusemi were being cut down without being able to respond at all. It closed the distance once again getting underfoot of the monsters——or else countless blades would rise up from the shadows, and, utilizing penetration techniques, they were subjected to being minced. The floor of the fifth floor was being turned into a strange space in which countless distorted blades had sprouted.

Flustered by the dramatic sudden reversal, Doumon's face was twitching as he shook his head from side to side.

[9] *Alternative way of pronouncing the Kanji for blade*

“Ridiculous! Cleaning up scores of them in an instant!? What! What's, that sacred treasure!? It isn’t one of the Four Fiends, is it!? Blades that appear from the shadows!? Such an ability was completely unknown!!”

Tobio approached the man. He had no plan on forgiving him. Since this assuredly was one of the ringleaders——.

Doumon produced fresh talismans from his breast pocket, and tossed them at Tobio after reciting a spell. ——But, as a result of Jin emerging from out of the shadow at Doumon’s feet, they were completely turned into trash. He had been transferred through the shadow. He had already learned how to use that transfer ability from before. So long as it was within his field of vision, he was able to freely transfer Jin from within shadows. Jin thrust his forehead’s specialized weapon at Doumon. His partner Jin did not provide Doumon even a single break.

“You’re all that’s left”

What was seen before Tobio’s eyes, regarding the man who had fallen on the spot on his rear, he was creeping to try to get away. The composure from a little while ago was not present in the slightest.

“Hii. Don’t come! Don’t come near here!”

The man’s eyes were corpse-like in appearance.

As Tobio was raising his hand, a dazzling brilliance was appeared horizontally on the floor. As he watched, a magic square-like thing appeared, from which the figure of a person emerged.

A man who was about forty appeared from the center of the magic square and approached the shrieking Doumon.

“Kazuhisa!! Retreat from here!”

Doumon recognized him.

“Section Chief Himejima!”

——Himejima. Himejima was it?

Tobio had a reaction to that name.

……No, by no means, such a thing cannot happen.

At that instant, Doumon took advantage of the chance from his spirit being shaken to retrieve a cylinder-like object from his pocket, and fired it his way. Instantly, a flash spread through the floor, depriving Tobio and company of their sight. With their vision dazzled, only the voice of the man who had appeared from the magic square could be heard.

"——Interesting. To have met you. <<Dog>>."

By the time their eyes had recovered, it was too late as the men were vanishing from the floor. Similarly, the Utsusemi had also completely gone. By means of that magic square, they had seemingly fled from this place.

"……Heh, they got away huh."

Samejima sighed as such while short of breath.

The black aura around Tobio disappeared and he suddenly seemed tired, immediately sitting down. Due to the effort of having been exploding with anger, it seems that he burned through his stamina all at once.

From a short distance away, two sets of footsteps were ascending the escalator.

"Ikuse-kun, Samjima-kun! Are you safe!?"

It was Minagawa Natsume and Lavinia. Given the uncleanliness of their clothes, it could be inferred that there was a fierce battle down below.

"Shut it, birdbrain."

In response to Samejima's shocking statement, Natsume angrily scolded him.

“Who are you calling birdbrain!? You’re the cause of this due to having plunged in here as you pleased, right?”

As those two started an argument somewhere else, Lavinia spoke while approaching Tobio.

“……Toby, you desire reached that child, right.”

The puppy——Jin was wagging his tail beside him. Seeing that Tobio smiled.

“Aah, thanks to you.”

Indeed, thanks to Lavinia’s advice, Tobio had expressed strong thoughts, strong desires. Through that, Jin had gained power.

Smiling, Lavinia simply said, “That’s excellent.”

Natsume, who had finished arguing, let out a deep breath behind him saying

Well now, since all the members have now been gathered, it’s time to once again meet with the ‘Governor General’. Last time he did not explain things in detail.”

Samejima’s stern eyes offered no objection. He as well had things about the current situation he wished to hear about from this supposed ‘Governor General’.

After a short break, the foursome slipped out of the department store, and advanced towards the location of the ‘Governor General’.

Part 3

The afternoon of that day, having disembarked at the designated station, Tobio and company, following Natsume’s guidance, were walking hastily.

From the station it was about a fifteen minute walk to the multi-tenant building that was their destination. This was the location designated by the ‘Governor General’ where Natsume could establish contact.

The presence of the man could not be felt from outside. In order to check the interior, Tobio had entered the multi-story building. The room of concern was on the fourth floor. The elevator was broken though, and was therefore unusable. Thus they all ascended the stairwell, with the fourth floor as their destination.

Having ascended, there was a dim light coming from a certain door. They turned the doorknob, and while making a *kii* sound, they opened the door. The room was arranged like that of a cram school classroom, with who knew how many long white desks and chairs lined up. They were able to confirm a something like an enormous screen.

Even though it was daytime, there was a black curtain hanging over the window. If it were not for the light on the ceiling it was likely the room would be pitch black.

At a short distance, the room was installed with a speaker that began to make noise.

<<……Hello, ladies and gentlemen, those who formerly were second year students at Ryoukuu High School.>>

Abruptly, there was a male voice heard through the speaker. Tobio and Samejima responded to the spoken words ‘Ryoukuu High School’. As for Natsume, being the only one who was acquainted with this voice, she remained composed.

……There was something about that voice caused one of Tobio’s memories to suddenly be recalled. He remembered it from somewhere.

<<It would appear, Minagawa Natsume, that you have diligently accomplished your goal.>>

“It would seem so. So, as promised the three of us have gathered, so aren’t there various things we should be informed of?”

<<So it would seem.>>

At Tobio's feet, Jin was seated. Griphon was near Natsume. The white cat was on alert on chair immediately next to Samejima.

<<First let me introduce myself. I am the leader of an organization that studies supernatural abilities like those of the Sacred Gears. The name of this organization is 'Grigori'. Beyond the study of Sacred Gears, we also do things like safeguarding the owners. That condominium where you all have been hiding, that is one such hiding place for people with such powers.>>

……'Grigori'. Speaking of which, the name the man has spoked was also named by Doumon. In that case Tobio's memory was certain of one thing, that that name should be something that appeared in the records of the Bible.

Tobio turned to face in the direction of the speaker.

"There are numerous questions, and I would like to hear the answers to them."

<<Aah, even if I'm in a position of superiority, though I can get in contact at a moment's notice, I am not in a position to discuss confidential information……but, it's good that you all seem to have decided to take the next step any time now.>>

"We understand that we carry these things called Sacred Gears. This power which by common sense is unimaginable. Those guys, who are colleagues as part of a certain agency in this country, attacked the ship during the school trip, and it was our power that was the goal of that mayhem——."

<<That's about it, Ikuse Tobio. Before we speak about that agency, I want you guys to hear about those guys' plot. From the underside of this country, since ancient times, there has been numerous groups of people who had been waging war against evil spirits. That was the power of the

man you all encountered. Onmyoudou[10], or possibly magic, such a method is used to call supernatural power to appear in one's hand——. It is exceedingly similar to the witchcraft practiced by Lavinia, but also extremely different.>>

……So supernatural powers wasn't limited to just witchcraft, but even extended to include Onmyoudou as well. The heck, how did we get ourselves mixed up in these things? The minds of Tobio and company were unsettled.

The 'Governor General' continued.

<<From among these Inou Tsukai[11] there are five families that possess especially potent power, who are known by those in this country as "The Five Principal Clans".>>

"The Five Princely Clans?"[12]

To Natsume's words, the 'Governor General' explained further.

<<Doumon, Kushihashi, Shinra, Himejima, and lastly Nakiri. These are the "Five Principal Clans". Those descended from these were evil spirit eradication specialists who have protected this country from the shadows, possibly even giving their lives in the intimate fulfillment of their duties. ——Nevertheless, people on the fringes of each of these clans have been rampaging. This is the group is presently attacking you, and they are the masterminds behind this affair.>>

Samejima, while sitting in a pose of poor manners with his feet propped up on top of the desk, spoke.

"Now that you mention it, when Ikuse and I were attacked by that guy this morning didn't he call himself Doumon?"

[10] *Think of this a Japanese magic. The term refers to the principles of Yin and Yang*
[11] *special ability users*
[12] *It seems Natsume misheard 五大宗家 as 五代宗家 which has an identical reading. 五大 usually refers to the five elements in Japanese philosophy while 五代 refers to the five dynasties.*

Right, the man who had displayed that offensive smile had named himself as 'Doumon'. And then, the man who came as his relief who appeared through the magic square, he had called him 'Himejima'.

<<They discovered the owners of the sacred treasures in which the evil spirits known as the "Four Fiends" had been sealed. Those ones possess top class abilities among the independent-avatar types. Minagawa Natsume, Samejima Kouki, there seems to be no mistake that you possess "Four Fiends".>>

Natsume and Samejima looked at the falcon and cat respectively. Tobio turned towards Jin.

……This is one of 'The Four Fiends'? To begin with, we haven't even been informed about these 'Four Fiends'. I understand that, for some reason or another, they are called evil spirits. These animals, there exists plenty enough for one to perceive that they aren't exactly ordinary animals.

……But, that this would be related to the 'Four Fiends Project' Doumon had previously spoken of.

<<The Four Fiends, consisting of Konton (Gluttony), Toukotsu (Ignorance), Toutetsu (Chaos), and Kyuuki (Deviousness), they are legendary monsters that appear as bringers of ill fortune. They were exterminated in ancient times, and were turned into Sacred Gears. Those have been passed down until today, and have now become your power.>>[13]

……One could sense something eerie from those names.

Samjima was taking out his mobile phone, and was searching for information on the 'Four Fiends'.

"……And like poof after lazily searching for these incomprehensible things, I've learned that those aforementioned named seem to be associated with something called The Four Divine Beasts or such.

[13] *Words in parentheses are approximate English translations*

Something Genbu (Black Tortoise) and Suzaku (Vermilion Bird) or whatnot. Is there some relation to these 'Four Fiends'?"

<<——There is. Each family from the Five Principal Clans respectively governs one of the Four Divine Beasts and the Ouryuu (Yellow Dragon). When a person is born within the family possessing this almighty power there's a rule they be bestowed with the name of the ability such as Suzaku or Genbu. The ones involved this affair at this time are the reverse, they are all from among those who did not inherit the name of their household.>>

"……Somehow, it's become strongly reminiscent of fantasy. It was all one could handle with magical girls and Sacred Gears, but even so from the underside of this country there's things like exorcists and people with supernatural abilities and whatnot……"

Natsume was pondering while holding her hand to her forehead. As one would expect of Natsume she was struggling to understand the situation. Tobio was the same way. What with monsters, Sacred Gears, witchcraft, and now the Four Divine Beasts, considering they had all been ordinary high school students until quite recently, such things greatly exceeded their degree of comprehension.

Tobio asked.

"……Those guys who are attacking us, they desire the Four Fiends——our sacred treasures?"

<<Ahh, that is so. Those guys acting from the underside this time——those who are affiliated with the 'Utsusemi Agency', from the start, were forcibly expelled from their households as a nuisance so they are nothing more than outcasts. Those people have gathered together, and they bear a severe grudge against those heads of households that completely cut ties with them. They are in need of power to triumph over them. Accordingly, they mobilized to obtain the power of the 'Four Fiends'.>>

"——So that's the reason behind the attack on the luxury liner. They seek to utilize the Four Fiends in opposition to the Four Divine Beasts and such."

To Samejima's statement, the 'Governor General' affirmed with 'That is so'.

<<Those guys attacked in the middle of the school trip merely to retrieve all of the students. It was beneficial for those guys, the fact that half the ship sank deep underwater the way it did. Beneficial since it seemed to save them time arranging for the several missing human corpses. After that all that remained was dealing with the bereaved families. At any rate, for that they used hypnotism so that the relatives would mourn for the children whose survival was unknown. It should be that those of you who were in attendance at the funeral service had a feeling of discomfort. To some extent, that funeral service would have appeared to be an act. Those guys smothered any hope for their children that existed in the minds of the parents. All for the sake of achieving their ambitions——>>

……In that way, the 'Governor General' had explained the origin of the uncomfortable feeling from the joint funeral service. The people who were now targeting them, they had been controlling the minds of the students' relatives……!!

……From the story he had acquired fury towards their extreme selfishness. The people of that agency, the ones who'd been exiled from the Five Principal Clans, all for the sake of triumphing over the ones who'd expelled them, had attacked the students of Ryoukuu High School. It wasn't that the power he, Minagawa Natsume and the rest possessed was the cause, wasn't it the case that such situation, one where they had not been targeted to begin with, would not have transpired from the beginning?

For him and Sae to have peacefully and ordinarily spent everyday together, would appear to have been a highly unlikely situation——.

Natsume inquired.

“So then, what is the reason you are cooperating with us ‘Governor General’? Even though I realize that you have arranged things like following up with strangers like us at this place, how do I know if you’re not a good person?”

That is what Tobio was also feeling. There doesn’t seem to be a reason to give them so much care, is there? Naturally, he was entrusting the fighting to them, but with the exception of his face, he was supplying them with this much information at this time.

<<Regarding the Utsusemi, the technique that was being used to develop them is from within my organization——they are a result of a leak of information relating to artificial Sacred Gears. Information regarding you all and the matter of the Four Fiends was also leaked to that agency by an informer within the organization. From the beginning our organization effectively caused this calamity. In this case, essentially, it can surely be said that we should be the ones who set out to stop it……but there are complicated circumstances related to this world, so we cannot readily interfere. Even though we’d be supporting you, from a different perspective there’d be no choice but to view it as a scandal. Our organization wishes to obstruct the current experiment on artificial Sacred Gears, and also to seize the one who has become a traitor.>>

——!

……They completely lost it at his words. Only Lavinia, who had been aware of the circumstances, acted composed, but Tobio and company couldn’t hide their shock.

As his expression changed to one of anger, Samejima violently struck the desk.

“Njya, so we had to go through such things because of your incompetence!? This is no jest!”

Samejima was unable to conceal his rage, and Tobio as well was only managing to not succumb to his fury, it was just so completely outrageous. Lavinia raised her hand.

"Shark, please don't just blame the Governor General. To be honest, on this occasion, given that my organization——the magician's association has also been pursuing a group that's participating with those people, it is therefore not just a deficiency on the part of the Governor-General's organization. While there are some bad factors, we are all tied to the current scandal. Despite this, the 'Grigori' and I are cooperating, and have planned to pursue those people, and so here we are. Until now I haven't discussed this with Shark and the rest and I believe that is my responsibility. If you're angry, then I ask you to be angry at me. But, I simply wanted you to be aware of this. Had we had this extraordinary discussion all at once, surely Natsume, Toby, and Shark would have all felt as though their heads were going to burst, so as to have you all come to grips with the hard facts little by little, we choose to explain things gradually."

Lavinia rapidly bowed her head in apology. Her tone of voice had seemingly dropped to some extent.

……So it wasn't just the traitor in the 'Governor General's' organization, there were also some suspicious people that the magician's association was pursuing, and both were collaborating with the 'Utsusemi Agency', and were taking part in both the Utsusemi——the artificial Sacred Gear experiment as well as the 'Four Fiends Project'……?

Samejima put on a complex expression in response to Lavinia's apology, as he scratched his head and, with no place to go, "Ah, damn it!" he cursed.

Forcibly suppressing his rage, Samejima cut off the conversation in order to inquire of the 'Governor General'.

"By all means I suppose you can keep piling on the unreasonable excuses at this late hour. It's good enough that we've all come to annihilate those bastards. Other than that I have just one more thing to ask of you."

Samejima turned and glared at the speaker.

<<What is it?>>

“Those that were changed into Utsusemi by those bastards, can they be returned to how they once were again?”

That question, it was also one harbored by Tobio and Natsume.

<<——They can be restored. I personally guarantee it.>>

Hearing that Samejima struck the palm of right palm with his left fist. His expression was full of energy.

<<Maeda Nobushige——. He was your friend. He will be safely brought, restored to his original state, I promise. The same for the friends of Minagawa Natsume and Ikuse Tobio.>>

Hearing that Tobio and Natsume’s expressions brightened.

“Seeing as you’re someone I know nothing about, as of yet I can’t believe what you say, don’t you agree? I cannot consent to how you guys brought about this current affair……but for restoring my buddy to how he was, in that case I’m willing to give you a shot, so this is your chance to repay your debt. Because after what that agency did I didn’t feel alive at all. For the sake of annihilating them you have my support.”

<<What I did was unforgivable. I would like to apologize for not showing my face at this time. But, I promise that we will without fail meet face to face someday.>>

The voice of the ‘Governor General’, until the end he responded with complete sincerity.

Natsume whispered to Tobio, “That attitude of Samejima-kun, that’s what you would call a tsundere,” and gave a small laugh.

The present matter, it would be some time until they got to the bottom of it. There were secret maneuvers that likely exceeded their imaginations. But, there was at least one piece of excellent news. Hope——could now be clearly seen!

——He would take Sae back.

As of yet he had not been able to meet his childhood friend. But, now he had comrades with whom he would be taking her back.

He would save her without fail. Without fail——he would reclaim those ordinary days.

Natsume asked about a different matter.

"Say, 'Governor General'. The other children——the rest of those who survived, what has become of them?"

Indeed, it's as Natsume said. In addition to themselves there were others who had not participated in the trip. Themselves included, there were nine altogether——. That they would be caught up in the present scandal, due to obtaining the same abilities as them, that shouldn't be the case, right?

The 'Governor General' said.

<<While there were nine people who didn't participate in the trip, there is no mistake that there are only four people that are 'Four Fiends'. However, other than those that survived, the rest were all normal humans, not those who possess Sacred Gears. It is presently known that seven of the nine have Sacred Gears——they're people with special abilities. Among them, four of them are 'Four Fiends.>>

"So the remaining two are ordinary humans?"

To Natsume's query the 'Governor General' answered, "Uhuh."

<<For those who were ordinary people, they have been removed from this affair, and are living ordinary lives that are unchanged. But, as for the Four Fiends and the three others with special abilities, they are being pursued by those guys. Regarding the Four Fiends who are not among you guys, they have refused to cooperate with us and are rampaging on their own. Regarding the three remaining, our side is already concealing their location.>>

It's possible to say that such inquiries for information of the other survivors are quite precious. If it was possible for everyone to fight together…… though from among the survivors, those students who were picked may have possessed an ominous atmosphere while in school, supposing it were true that those who come into contact with the Four Fiends are met with misfortune. ……I pray that, for those student who don't possess abilities, they may continue to live ordinary lives, Tobio thought strongly.

<<Regarding the "Four Fiends", naturally it is often the case that the four of them are all drawn to the same place. Since ancient times, whenever they awaken, this has been the unique invariable principle of the "Four Fiends". Whether fortunate or unfortunate, that is the reason you have all assembled in one building. Sooner or later, you are bound to come across the remaining two people.>>

……Two people? The threesome of Tobio, Natsume, and Samejima all felt puzzled over the 'Governor General's' words. Regarding the Four Fiends——wasn't there only one left? Speaking of which, when the 'Governor General' made his assertions some time ago he did not include Tobio among them. The ones he designated as such——were only Natsume and Samejima.

The 'Governor General' spoke to Tobio.

<<——Boy of the black dog, Ikuse was it. That dog of yours I would guess was not hatched from the 'egg', right? It appeared next to you by itself——. Isn't that the case?>>

——!

……Right, Jin was not hatched from that egg. He arose by himself from the shadows.

……Having been guessed correctly, Tobio gulped.

"……How, regarding that……?"

He timidly asked in return.

<>

Looking over at Lavinia, she was narrowing her eyes curiously.

"Probably, Toby is a foreign element that was beyond all expectations of theirs."

……That black aura-like thing, that wasn't the power of the Four Fiends? If so, regarding its true strength……Jin's true identity, what was it? Just a short while ago, he had said that the three who had special abilities who were not among the 'Four Fiends' were being concealed……that is to say, he was one of those that comprised those he'd spoken of.

It would appear that Lavinia and the 'Governor General' had somehow or another guessed at the truth behind Tobio's power…….

<<Ikuse Tobio, where is your Obaa-chan currently living?>>

"She passed away around the time I was in middle school."

Tobio spoke with no lies.

<<Is that so, I wonder if you wouldn't inform me of your Obaa-chan's former surname.>>

"……It was Himejima."

……When Doumon had named the man who appeared at that time as Himejima, Tobio had been momentarily surprised. It wasn't by chance, since it was the same name as his grandmother's former surname.

Hearing that the 'Governor General'——began laughing.

<<……Kukukukuku>>

"……Governor General? Did something happen?"

Natsume spoke while having a question mark floating over her head.

<<……No, not really. It's just that that punch of sarcasm was so effective that for the first time in a while I have nothing to say. ……No matter how much you

try to purify the darkness in that family, it seems that there's nothing that can be done about this generation, Chief-dono. Kukuku, so the "dog" is only a "dog".[14] *You who hated the feathered lightning, will now go as far as to purify the "dog"?>>*

Amused the 'Governor General' chuckled himself like that. No one could fathom his true meaning.

"……By some chance, what you were saying earlier about the 'Five Principal Clans', is there some connection between Obaa-chan and that guy?"

Apparently Samejima was thinking of the same thing as Tobio, as he was voicing such an inquiry.

But the 'Governor General purposefully said nothing about it.

<<No, don't mind that now. If it's true that everything has already been determined, then I guess everyone is related to it. But, youth of the black dog. You have other things to occupy your mind outside of the matter of "Himejima". Regarding that name, it is part of a very weighty affair involving things with the underside of this country.>>

As of yet Tobio did not understand.

They had a rendezvous with the 'Five Principal Clans', where they would be defying their destiny——.

Chapter 4 –Silver Haired/Youth

Part 1

When Tobio left the multi-tenant building, as Samejima was mounting his motorcycle, Natsume had detained him and had begun quarreling.

[14] *'Dog' can be derogatory so I think that's what's being said*

“Just a minute, where are you going!?”

“I’m just going back. I’m about to collapse from exhaustion after all that’s happened today.”

“I wonder, are you truly going back? So you’re not going to do something like stopping on the way and start fighting again on your own and such, if you’ll pardon my asking?”

“Ah, yeah yeah. Although, if the affair’s mastermind should become known to me, I will be drawn in by that.”

“Do you think taking such dangerous actions singlehandedly is reliable? Were you not listening to what the ‘Governor General’ said? And yet, you’re going to attack such awful people? It’s no good unless everyone is cooperating!”

Samejima placed the white cat that had been sitting on the fuel tank into the bosom of his shirt.

“This guy will succeed somehow or other.”

The white cat, only the head of which could be seen from within the shirt, purred “Nyah.”

Having gone beyond rage directed at the self-assured Samejima, Natsume was now wearing a disgusted expression.

“……Strictly speaking, I wonder if your extremely proactive behavior is due to something other than you just acting as you see fit……”

Having been aware of the condition of his buddy Maeda, it seems that Samejima had been operating independently for the sake of pursuing those who were the masterminds behind this affair. For the sake of that, he had been causing havoc on his own, thus gaining the notice of the ‘Utsusemi Agency’, all for the goal of successfully luring out one of their agents. As is befitting such selfish behavior, while investigating the present condition of his buddy, in his rage against those people he had deceived the rest of them. In relation to such behavior, Tobio was not

unable to understand what emotions he was harboring. Having acquired such great power himself, in spite of only vaguely understanding the complete circumstances of the enemy, in order to quickly become aware of Sae's present condition it was uncertain whether or not he might have also acted alone. For Tobio, it did not seem likely that Samejima's behavior was due to indifference.

Natsume turned to Tobio.

"Ikuse-kun, help me stop this Yankee."

Raising a protest of "I'm supposed to stop him!?" in his mind, he spoke in such a way so as not to damage the mood of the juvenile delinquent in front of them.

Tobio thought back calmly, recalling that as they were leaving the room in the multi-tenant building Natsume had been discussing that with him while whispering.

"By stopping him, you mean that Minagawa-san's has something to convey don't you?"

Indeed, Natsume had said that she had received information from the 'Governor General'.

"Oh right", Natsume recalled as she began searching through her bag.

Natsume took a several printed pages out from a clear file that was holding it, which she then showed to both Tobio and Samejima.

The printed pages she produced had row by row listings of full names and addresses of people. Looking carefully, the names and addresses listed were familiar.

"This is a listing of the students who were declared to have been killed in the accident."

"This is also from the 'Governor General'?"

To Tobio's question, Natsume answered "Yeah." Flipping through the pages, Natsume showed a particular page.

"So, this is the problem. Look here. The members of the bereaved families, they changed residences. Moreover, they all did so at almost the same time. Can you believe that? The bereaved families of the 233 students, all of them moved elsewhere around the exact same time."

For certain, that was far too unnatural. Something like over 200 families changing residences altogether was abnormal.

……Right, Sae's parents had moved without contacting him. Sae's parents been looking after Tobio since he was young. In the case they were to move, they should have at least said something.

At the aforementioned joint funeral service, regarding Sae's parents and the other bereaved families likewise, they had all been placed under hypnosis creating an uncomfortable feeling that resulted from them only pretending to look grief-stricken.

It seems these changes in the bereaved families were linked. ——That is to say,

"……It was influenced by the 'Utsusemi Agency'?"

Natsume nodded at Tobio's words.

"Yeah, there's no doubt. Moreover, it's suspicious how the destination for all of the moves is unknown. Although they've gone to such trouble for this information, the destinations of the bereaved families cannot be determined. Such a thing as over 200 families disappearing altogether, it's an excessively impossible story. Generally if that's the case, it would soon become a controversial scandal. No, it should already be a scandal. And yet, it isn't."

"……The influence of the group called Five Principle Clans from underside of this country is vast. That the Utsusemi Agency could gather up all those people involved……. If those people are involved in this……."

The power to be able to transfer all of the bereaved families to some place. It was certain that this was the great power of the underside that was at work.

"If we pursue this, it's possible we might come to understand some of the unknowns regarding the matter of the 'Utsusemi Agency' and the Five Principal Clans."

Natsume declared with a strong voice. Her expression was serious.

"It's not just Samejima-kun, but I as well, I acted on my own because I couldn't forgive those who had screwed with the lives of our fellow students. ……We are in possession of independent avatar type Sacred Gears such as the 'Four Fiends'……assuming that, wouldn't you agree that from the very start this was the cause of them pursuing us for the sake of triumphing over those Family guys? ……There's those who have died. Although it's unforgivable how they've abused our kidnapped classmates, there were unrelated people who embarked on that ship who have died. …… Such a thing as us being the cause of it ……is not the case at all. ……Whether our classmates, or the numerous sailors, I don't feel guilty…...rather, I only desire to get revenge for their sake."

……Natsume's tone was full of bitterness, her eyes were strongly dyed with grief.

He understood Natsume's declaration. The sinking incident of the luxury liner, from the beginning the cause was the actions of the 'Utsusemi Agency who were targeting the 'Four Fiends' that dwell within Natsume and Samejima. Whether their fellow students, the ship's crew, it was all surely due to the ideology of the 'Utsusemi Agency'.

Natsume suddenly spoke apologetically to Tobio.

"Sorry, Ikuse-kun. Ikuse-kun's childhood friend Toujou-san is a victim because of us. Even though a Sacred Gear also dwells within Ikuse-kun, it's apparently different from the 'Four Fiends'……"

……That's right, there was that way of thinking of it Tobio thought. Since becoming involved in this incident, having become involved just

yesterday, or even since he had been informed of the complete truth just a short while ago, upon hearing Natsume's apology, for the first time Tobio realized that truthfully both he and Sae were part of the victims.

——There's a distinction between the Sacred Gear I possess and the 'Four Fiends'.

Since he doesn't have the power those guys are seeking, he's unrelated? ……No, saying that is too much. There's no way, seeing as Tobio's roots——his grandmother belonging to the 'Himejima', it's similar to him being involved. Since that's how it was, this wasn't just someone else's problem.

Tobio shook his head in dismissal of Natsume's remark.

"……It's highly unlikely that I'm truly unrelated to this……moreover I was once rescued by Minagawa-san."

Right, yesterday, when Sasaki had suddenly attacked Natsume had saved Tobio. From that Tobio had perceived that she has good intentions. In that case, it was better that he thank her.

"Thank you very much for what you did at that dangerous place yesterday. I want to once again express my gratitude. Moreover I have an important duty to rescue Sae as well. Isn't it more effective if we act as a united front?"

It was the opposite of what Tobio had just heard.

"E-eeh, naturally."

Responding as such in astonishment she announced in front of Tobio.

"Well then, let's fight together until the end. Although it's unknown how long it will take, I suppose it should be at least until we rescue our classmates. All of those who attended Ryoukuu likewise."

Tobio was expressing his honest feelings.

They had faced many perils. It was only natural. Should a single mistake have been made, there was no doubt——death would have followed. That monster's tentacle would have sliced his throat and he would have died.

Since up till now they required the 'Four Fiends', it seemed things wouldn't go as far as them being killed. But, those guys were aware that he was not one of the 'Four Fiends'. ……From here on out the risk of death would swell. Anyhow, considering it was those guys it would be the same for him even if he wasn't part of the group. Apart from his connection to the 'Himejima', wouldn't Natsume and Samejima be of greater worth than himself? ……The answer was 'I don't know'. While it appeared that his own power was irregular, as for whether they would consider it valuable or not, that was not presently clear. It seems it would be batter to consider that it was still a highly risky situation.

However, for the sake rescuing Sae there was another person fighting who needed to be taken into account outside of Natsume and Samejima; it was wise judgement to have built a united front with Lavinia for the fight ahead. More than anything else about their fellowship from the past two days, it seemed likely that neither Natsume nor Samejima has any obvious hidden motives outside of rescuing their comrades. And while he had not yet grasped all the various facets of Lavinia and couldn't read her emotions from her expressions, her actions towards them did not seem to harbor and ill will. Indeed, it was unbelievable.

……There were many things to consider. They had gotten involved in something big, understanding that they stood in a dangerous position. But, they were all prepared to rescue the students of Ryoukuu, their classmates. That being the case, they had a motive to fight together from here on——isn't that enough for now? Indeed, Tobio believed this to be the case.

Regarding the Natsume in question, upon hearing Tobio's brief comment, her eyes were moistening.

"……Ikuse-kun, you're a kindhearted person."

He was a kindhearted person? That was something that wasn't too clear to him. However, Natsume was a nice person. In light of Sae being kidnapped, all those unrelated people being killed, all the evil intent scattered by those people's selfishness, this was what Tobio felt.

"Toby is a nice person."

It was Lavinia's voice. Looking over his shoulder, there was the figure of the blond haired magical girl emerging from the multi-tenant building. She alone had remained behind in the room of the multi-tenant building in discussion with the 'Governor General'.

Lavinia gathered the black puppy at Tobio's feet, Jin, into her arms. Since Jin peacefully entrusted his body to her, it could likewise be said that Lavinia appeared to not possess so much as one iota of evil intention.

"……Hahahahah!"

Samejima was raising such laughter in amusement.

"Oi."

Samejima called out. Looking at him, he was showing a pleasant smile. Groping through the pocket of his trousers, he took out his mobile phone. He turned the screen towards Tobio.

"——It's my number. Register it speedily."

At the abrupt proposal, Tobio, just as he took out his own mobile phone, was flabbergasted.

"Aah!"

Tobio quickly operated the buttons to register Samejima's number. Thereupon, Saemjima's mobile rang.

"There, that's my number."

Tobio announced it in that way and Samejima acknowledged. Tobio abruptly inquired.

“But, why’re giving me your number all of a sudden?”

To Tobio’s query, Samejima kept on showing that smile as he said.

“Just a likable fool. Ikuse, you are the biggest fool. ——Well then, I’m going back now. Once there, if anything should come up I’ll contact you.”

Samejima, with the white cat placed in his bosom, donned his full-face helmet.

“Ah! In spite of this we haven’t yet discussed this matter.”

From elsewhere Natsume raised a critical voice, as Samejima revved the accelerator. There was a fierce sound from the muffler.

“Ask me about it after I’ve had a rest at the condominium. Well till then, Ikuse.”

Samejima thrust his index finger at Tobio.

“——Three days. For starters, spend three days of intensive training with that mutt. Seeing as the mastermind has been revealed, it seems those guys’ll be putting in some strenuous effort. In that case, it seems that making use of your mutt’s shadow sword that I saw will be indispensable. In three day, I intend to have it face Byakusa. Oi, Birdbrain.”

“What!”

Being displeased with the nickname Birdbrain, Natsume didn’t care about what Samejima had to say.

“Introduce Ikuse to Vali. He might be a shitty cheeky brat, but when it comes to Sacred Gears, well, it seems that he passes.”

Saying that much, Samejima opened the accelerator to full and speedily departed.

“Ouu! From top to bottom he’s always just doing things his way!”

Natsume stomped her feet, too late as the delinquent was already out of sight and could not hear her complaint.

……Intensive training, huh. While looking at Jin who was being held by Lavinia, Tobio felt that it would be indispensable.

——I’m unable to make use of Jin’s ability unless it’s a life threatening situation.

……Very soon they would be commencing the search for Sae’s location, but as Samejima had said henceforth the peril would not be equivalent to yesterday and today but rather they could expect it to be to an even greater degree.

Tobio resolved himself, that in three days he would face him with Jin.

Part 2

The morning of the next day——.

Tobio was on the rooftop of the condominium. Jin was beside him. Empty steel cans were placed on top of a beer bottle case.

He noticed that someone had abruptly come up to the rooftop. ——It was Natsume.

“You were also here. Good morning!! ——Uh, what are you doing?”

After a casual morning greeting, Natsume inquired about the empty cans Tobio had set up.

“Good morning. This? I was trying a little something just now.”

"?"

To the question mark Natsume raised, Tobio gave a sidelong glance towards Jin.

"Jin, go!"

Hearing Tobio's command, a katana-like protuberance appeared on Jin's forehead. Next Tobio pointed at on the empty cans.

"Slash."

Together with that cry, the black puppy transformed in a flash and rushed forwards. And then, the empty steel can was cut diagonally in two. The empty can that was diagonally cut in half dropped down with a particularly dry sound.

"Ooh, amazing."

Natsume was applauding with clapping her hands.

"So far it is. Next."

Tobio issued his next instruction for Jin to return stand by his feet. Tobio then threw several empty cans high into the air.

"Juump!"

Receiving that command, a pair of double-edged swords, whose appearance was like those carried by western knights, appeared from Jin's back like wings.

"Slash!"

In accordance with Tobio's instruction, Jin began leaping with tremendous vigor. One by one he was chopping up the empty steel can spinning through the air.

While also using the single-edged sword that had appeared on his forehead, the last of the empty cans was pierced by the blade.

Tobio exhaled with a seemingly satisfied expression, and said to Jin, "That's fine now." Hearing that, Jin turned his body back from being a sword.

"Ooh!!"

To his coordination with Jin Natsume applauded even more so. She then asked with apparent great interest.

"Somehow, since I saw it yesterday, has Jin-chan's sword gotten sharper?"

"Uhuh. As a matter of fact, I've been training him since coming back yesterday. From the DVDs that are stored in the condominium's communal room, I selected period dramas and movies about knights and such to show to Jin."

Yesterday, after the fierce battle at the department store and receiving the explanation from the 'Governor General' in the multi-building, having returned to the condominium, Tobio had watched DVDs that were stored in the condominium's communal room. In there, all sorts of movie varieties were provided, from various cultures and genres.

From there he had chosen period dramas and movies set in medieval Europe and watched them together with Jin. It had been his intuition, that by watching videos featuring swordsmen and samurai would improve the sharpness of the protrusions that grow from Jin, but he hadn't expected it to produce this much of a difference.

The actors in the TV programs, they would engage in casual swordfights. He had been watching the screen intently along with the important Jin. While it was unclear whether or not he understood it, he fixed his gaze upon the period dramas without once looking away.

For the puppy's image, Tobio wasn't particularly concerned with the sudden acts of violence. Still, this black puppy was obedient. It was as though he completely understood his true motives. Without voraciously devouring the bait, he still ate it entirely. Speaking of not taking too

much effort, this dog was called a Sacred Gear that embodies supernatural power. It wasn't a real dog.

'Divine punishment!'

During the program, they would rush into the climactic sword fighting scene just like that. It was the best part of the drama.

KIN! KIN! it went, as sword clashed with sword a metallic sound was heard. While watching the stylish sword fighting scene, Tobio would whisper and mutter.

"……You can grow such a sword, which can also be stylish."

He had said that in a somewhat jocular manner, yet in the next moment——from the puppy's forehead a blade-like protuberance appeared in the likeness of the sword's appearance. At this moment what had grown was inorganic. The previous protuberance had been organic like the thorn of a rose.

Tobio's heart skipped a beat at this sudden occurrence, as the puppy had grown a sword from its forehead with an appearance similar to that the actor had been wielding in the TV program. Thus, the protuberance now resembled a Japanese sword——.

It was not strange therefore that the blade was extremely sharp, as it now resembled a sword.

——Did it respond to what I said?

Nothing else seemed likely given the circumstances.

For the sake of confirming this, Tobio spoke while facing the black puppy.

"A little bit sharper Jin……"

In response to those words, the sword extending from the puppy's forehead became slightly thinner, increasing in sharpness.

With a sudden inspiration, Tobio ordered the puppy, “Watch the swords in the TV program, thereby making your sword even more accurate.” Thereupon, as the black puppy intently watched the TV program, the sword on its forehead was repeatedly amended.

The forehead sword became thin, long, freely adjusting its shape while wriggling. Soon after observing this bizarre phenomenon, Tobio understood.

This puppy, having understood what I said, has altered its blade——.

During this time, Tobio intently observed at the puppy’s transformations.

After having watched however many movies, the condition of Jin compared to the earlier protuberance that was merely feasible——had grown had taken on the appearance of a double-edged sword.

In a period time of only four hours, the black puppy had successfully evolved——.

For the sake of testing out this peculiar blade of Jin’s, since evening Tobio had spent the entire practicing with the new sword. After explaining all of this to Natsume, Tobio continued.

“After that although I tried out several different ways of cutting, thinking over it I never settled upon specific instructions.”

On the rooftop, there were numerous empty cans and wooden planks scattered about. Of those, nearly all of them had been chopped up by Jin.

While placing all the chopped up planks and empty cans into a garbage bag Tobio spoke.

“I gathered all of this stuff from the trash collection area near this condominium and made use of it.”

“……All of last night, you were practicing continuously?”

Natsume inquired while swallowing saliva.

“Yeah, since yesterday its attacks were ineffective against those mud humanoids that man called Doumon used, even if it’s only a little I especially would like come up with some kind of countermeasure.”

Tobio believed however that it was still lacking with only this amount. Presently, the strength of the sword as well as its hardness had not changed. It had managed to manifest something similar to a western style double-edged sword, which when compared with the popular single-edged katana was more resilient but in terms of cutting power was weaker. Accordingly, the opportunity to make use of the double edged sword was in combination with a charge, when it would have the power to be drive through the target all at once.

For displaying a variety of swords, there were still several varieties available. However, for what is possible in just one night it was considerable. It was possible due to Jin’s unusual gift of learning.

“Good grief, apart from prior to my acquiring the Sacred Gear I hadn’t been defeated.”

Exhaling with disgust Natsume smiled bitterly.

Tobio believing that it would advantageous to strengthen his coordination with Natsume’s Griffon,

“That’s right, hey Minagawa-san. For coordinating with Griffon——“

In that way he took the opportunity to make a suggestion.

“——What’s this, that I’d come to hear such speech, is that the way things are?”

Suddenly the voice of a third person resounded on the rooftop.

Looking around for the source of the voice, he only saw silhouette of a person’s back standing in the open door to the rooftop nearby.

——In an instant, with good looking features like those of a young girl, he saw that it was a young silver haired boy.

Even though it was summer there was a scarf wrapped around his neck, yet nevertheless was wearing shorts down below, being dressed is a manner that was completely mismatched. On his right shoulder, there was a lovely white dragon (?) plush toy placed there. In contrast to his mature way of speaking, he was short, his voice was also sweet, and he seemingly appeared to be nothing more than someone in the later years of elementary school…….

“I cannot sense any aura at all from your body. How weak.”

This boy was strange. However, he was a child wrapped in a mysterious atmosphere. Perhaps, it would seem he was one of the residents of this condominium.

Tobio asked while feeling puzzled.

“……You are?”

However, as he watched Natsume’s figure was vigorously and briskly was approaching the boy.

“Just a minute! Aren’t you always being told that you shouldn’t say such things out of the blue? You give off such a bad impression upon first meeting someone, VALI!”

Natsume drew closer to the boy who only made a ‘humph’ sound with his nose.

“Humph, I don’t remember such a thing. When it comes to making first impression the other party’s aura is essential. Him over there and Natsume as well are below average at best.”

The boy made such an appraisal with half-closed eyes. ……Perhaps, the so called cheeky brat Natsume and Samejima had spoken of was…….

As Tobio thought that, Natsume introduced the boy.

“This child is Vali. See, he’s the cheeky brat in this condominium just like I was saying, don’t you agree? That’s this child.”

Aah, as expected, this was that child, wasn't it? It was for certain, whether it was his cynicism or his rebelliousness, Tobio thought this child aroused the image of what one would call a rather cheeky brat.

The silver haired youth——Vali, boldly enquired while looking up at Tobio.

"'Dog'-owner-kun, will you not fight with me?"

From the sweet voice came such an unimaginably belligerent tone, containing fighting spirit. In spite of having such a small body something incomparably ominous was being potently spread from his body.

Natsume flicked Vali's forehead with her finger.

"That's enough, Vali! Since after this you'll be members fighting together to defeat that group manipulating the Utsusemi, wouldn't you agree that you should stop such quarrelsome things? This isn't like that time you had the big fight with Samejima-kun!"

While holding his hand to his flicked forehead, Vali gave a fearless smile.

"Do I have to say it? In the case that we are going to join hands together, being aware of that person's true power is a natural right. At any rate, for someone to be a weak impediment has proven to be intolerable. Well, Samejima Kouki had managed to more or less gain a passing mark."

……Samejima, together with this boy, had already battled?
Understanding this much, he suddenly became interested.

—— Introduce Ikuse to Vali. He might be a shitty cheeky brat, but when it comes to Sacred Gears, well, it seems that he passes.

The words Samejima had spoken yesterday crossed his mind.

Jin also turned his gaze upon Vali, motionlessly staring at him. His eyes gleamed red as he sought to discern the entirety of the boy's power.

"……Understood. While I don't understand in what way this is satisfying to you……it's a good time to test out mine and my partner's fighting style."

Tobio had accepted Vali's challenge.

It was unknown what kind of power this boy called Vali possessed, but Tobio had spent the entire night without once reaching his goal of achieving that one thing.

That was——the aforementioned 'blade from the shadows'.

During that fight in the department store, Tobio's desire had reached a peak, and Jin had manifested that blade from the shadows, but in spite of the voluntary training since last evening there was no indication of it appearing. Tobio had issued the order to Jin, focusing on that in his mind yet the puppy didn't respond to it. Tobio had focused the entirety of his thought upon it, so it should have been transmitted to Jin.

Put simply, it was that Jin was not able to fulfil the conditions necessary to use that by himself, such was what Tobio in his bewilderment somehow or another sensed in his mind.

By fighting with this silver haired youth, perhaps he would be fortunate enough to catch some clue as to what the conditions were. Tobio purposefully accepted Vali's hostility for the sake of acquiring the blade from the shadows.

From here on they would be competing with the organization known as the 'Utsusemi Agency', so that power would be absolutely necessary. It'll be no different when it comes to rescuing Sae.

Yet within the next three days he must by all means become at least partially proficient in that power, that was his desire——.

Regarding the conditions for invoking that power, whether it was violent rage, or else perhaps terror, or…….

The boy, Vali, stood before Tobio and Jin. Watching them Vali raised some pleasant gossip.

“Isn’t it nice? It’s clad in such a nice aura. Although it seems you still can’t see it, there’s a pleasant hue of fighting spirit coming from its body.”

……Although he said that, Tobio didn’t see anything of the sort. That ability, was it that he was able to see things that couldn’t be seen? Extremely incomprehensible, from such a small build he couldn’t sense the slightest opening.

From the side Natsume spoke.

“……Be careful. Samejima-kun was thoroughly injured by this child. After all, according to what Lavinia said, he’s that ‘Governor General’s’ golden child. ——He’s strong.”

……Samejima couldn’t do a thing then? It had become clear during the battle at the department store, his handling of his Sacred Gear, the white cat, was to the point of completely disregarding the average Utsusemi. At the very least, the present him was seemingly more skilled than Natsume. This caused a gap to appear in his confidence.

Yet that Samejima hadn’t won. Was he in the same class as Doumon? Or perhaps even higher……. Shuddering due to the younger companion, Tobio commanded Jin without a second thought.

“Attention! Jin!”

The black puppy, having received the order, grew a blade-like protuberance from its forehead, and rushed straight ahead at high speed. Before Jin who had turned into a black bullet, the boy——didn’t so much as budge. He didn’t show any behavior of trying to avoid it.

Even if he was that strong, one would think that, considering the sharpness of the grown katana, Jin's attack from the front would result in receiving fatal injuries. Whether he ought to stop or whether he ought to continue, Tobio was racking his brains, but before he could make a decision Jin leapt at Vali!

It was a hit! No, just on the verge of being hit, using only the slightest movements——Vali avoided Jin's attack by just twisting his body to the side! There was no wasted movement! Yet Jin, who had just been avoided, immediately corrected his trajectory and gave pursuit! However, Vali was evading with ease!

Jin moved rapidly through Vali's surrounding, and after making numerous faints, pressed forward all at once, diagonally slashing with the katana on his forehead! This was something out of the special training from the previous evening! Jin had been chiefly trained to commence attacking in a straightforward manner! ——But, nevertheless Vali avoided it by jumping to the side.

However, Jin didn't fail to notice. Understanding that he was avoiding entirely by moving sideways, at this point he immediately turned towards Vali's landing spot, instantly giving chase! Even though Tobio was amazed by that reaction speed, the attack which landed a precise hit on that location ended in futility.

——In front of Vali, Jin's attack had been stopped due to him being held by the scruff of his neck.

Only just short of being struck, a direct hit had been avoided. Jin had been completely suppressed by being having the back of his neck grabbed.

Vali, while holding Jin's neck, suddenly leaked out

"……With this, it has become clear."

Muttering no more than that, he released Jin who lightly jumped back. The youth then motioned with his finger as though provoking him. Receiving that, Jin rushed forward——.

"——!"

Before Tobio's eyes, something unexpected occurred. The youth, all of a sudden, vanished. Although he'd been following him with his eyes up until just now, in the instant that he had blinked the silver haired youth had disappeared! Astonished Tobio looked around…….

"——!?"

……Tobio noticed a presence behind him. Timidly looking back, the youth was standing there pointing his palm at him. In his hand——a suspicious silver radiance was formed. ……From that radiance potent danger could be felt. Transmitted through the air, his body felt and an aggressive tingling sensation.

As his hand was glowing, Vali spoke.

"Regarding independent avatar type Sacred Gears, they are beasts that serve as alter egos that are caused to act in accordance with the intentions of the possessor. The greatest merit is that you can establish distance from your companion that is dealing out attacks, wouldn't you agree? By issuing instructions from a safe location without taking unnecessary damage you can defeat your opponent. But, the demerit——no, the weakness is easy to understand."

In an instant, his body receives a strong impact as he was attacked by a sense of being blown away. With a pain in his abdomen, he was sent off with a floating sensation…….

"GUWA!"

Having been launched backwards, crashing to the floor of the rooftop, Tobio raised a scream. He then rolled along for some time, finally ending up at the corner of the rooftop.

……What was fired from the silver haired youth's palm……had that been a Sacred Gear ability? Or else was it something that seems similar to Lavinia's magic? In any case, it was certain that, with the impact

created from his hand, taking that head on had completely blown him away.

Vali slowly approached while speaking.

“In the case where the main body of the independent avatar type is weak they can be frequently overwhelmed. You just have to close the distance.”

For the sake of protecting his master, Jin leapt at Vali’s flank……the youth again evaded without a care. No matter how many times he bravely leapt at him, not one of them ever struck Vali.

Vali came right up in front of Tobio, crouched down and spoke with a fearless smile.

“The same thing happened when Samejima Kouki had attempted to do the same against me. As a result, he established his style of fighting together with his other self.”

……Is that so, so Samejima’s placing the cat on his shoulder, changing it into a lance that winds around his arm, that’s was what he referring to?

By using a weapons for the sake of protecting himself, his style is one that can make use of the cat for both attack and defense simultaneously——. Indeed, Samejima had learned from his battle with this youth. Regarding Samejima, what he had said about having a bad experience with this youth, in this case it was now possible to properly understand what he meant.

——That is to say, bearing in mind the merits and demerits of independent avatar types, he did as much.

……Even understanding this point, there was no indication that he’d to able to counterattack this youth.

It appears that, regarding this small build young boy, that he was a companion of much higher rank than himself. There was absolutely

nothing he could do. That was definitely for sure even given Samejima's present condition.

Natsume as well had covered her face with an "Achah"[15]. Her reaction was as if to say, "As before, it's become like this huh."

……He ground his teeth at the bitterness of his disappointment.

——But, his present feelings were the opposite of the youth's, who was directing his gaze to the side with a pleasant expression on his face.

"……Indeed, but, it seems that's enough messing around."

Tobio followed his gaze——there, generating something black from his whole body, was Jin. His red eyes were displaying a highly dangerous gleam, letting out a low growl that could be seen as a threat against Vali. It was obvious, Jin was full of fury.

DOKUN.

……Suddenly there was a pulsing throb. Tobio noticed that his own body was exuding something black as well. ……This was the same phenomenon that happened during the battle in the department store. Looking around, the distorted blades had sprung up covering the entire rooftop. ——It was the blade from the shadows.

What was the switch that invoked it? Jin's fury? His master himself being in danger? Or perhaps both? Tobio was as yet unable to guess however, bathed in the indescribable pressure springing forth from Jin, Vali merely floated a delighted smile.

"Excellent. This is a fragment of its true nature, huh. Things like the forehead blade are more like a bonus wouldn't you agree? Come, strike!"

Spreading both hands, Vali took on a posture to meet his opponent! From the shadow at his feet, a huge blade was thrust up! Vali immediately jumped back avoiding a direct hit! However, blades

[15] Expression of annoyed surprise or shock

repeatedly sprang forth from the shadows formed wherever he landed! Vali evaded even so while enraptured using Taisaba![16]

With the exception of the directed attacks against Vali the rooftop was completely covered by blades that were continuously sprouting. In such a situation, the entirety of the rooftop had been completely filled with sharp protruding objects. While the silver haired youth was contented with the developing scene of the blades attacking from the shadows, Tobio decided to shout out while the situation had yet to develop beyond recovery.

"JIN! STOP!"

Hearing his master's order, Jin, who had been on the verge of springing upon Vali, immediately halted his movements.

Jin restored the forehead sword, still simmering as he met his master halfway. Seeing that, Vali pouted at that moment, sighing with boredom.

……It was clear that it had been a great battle.

To start with, it was necessary to have a technique to protect himself who was the master. In order to declare this fact, the youth himself had directly approached his adversary to end it. Ikuse Tobio, who had been an ordinary high school student, did not possess outstanding physical abilities.

……The ability released that time in the department store gave rise to temporarily improved physical abilities, but presently they were not present. Even though the blade from the shadows had become usable, that did not necessarily mean he himself would obtain limitless strength.

Thus, the blade from the shadows——. In regard to that, it's possible that that ability becomes expressible when the consciousness of both himself the master and Jin were simultaneously stimulated. For example, when Tobio was attacked by Vali——the master being at risk,

[16] TN: Martial arts term referring to defensive maneuvers

with the master having received an attack——together with Jin's fury, when these two things coincided not too long ago, was that was lead to witnessing the invocation?

While rising on the spot, Tobio held Jin in his arms. Within his arms the black puppy was wagging its tail. ……As of yet the complete nature of that ability had yet to be seen, a disappointment for himself who was the master, having exposed both himself and Jin to danger.

……Furthermore, it was absolutely necessary to comprehend that ability. Regarding the battle with Vali, there were numerous things to learn.

Having recovered his mood, Vali inquired.

"You, your name is?"

"It's Ikuse Tobio."

With Tobio having stated his name, Vali extended his hand while brimming with self-confidence and stated.

"Fuu, I'm Vali. While I'm of the bloodline of the Maou Lucifer I'm also a legendary dragon——the one who bears the one and only Vanishing Dragon[17]."

…….

…….

……M-Maou? Lucifer? D-dragon? The one……and only?

Tobio inclined his neck. Without warning, he was saying things like "Maou". Moreover, something about a "Dragon". ……To be repeatedly listing such supernatural phenomenon as part of his personal history, as one would expect with such beyond extraordinary terms like "Maou" and "Dragon", he couldn't help but to stymied.

[17] Kanji:White Dragon

Tobio, in some way or another,

"……A-aah, is that so?"

All he could do was respond as such and smile.

The aforementioned Vali was putting on airs with a posed expression while nodding in accent.

"Fuu, for someone like you who was an ordinary person until just the other day it's still too early for such talk."

……And with that that being said, Tobio was simply left in suspense.

Regarding this……wouldn't it be good to check with the youth's knowledge? Natsume suddenly approached and whispered in his ear.

(He's afflicted with the so called "2nd year of junior high school sickness" that's typical of his age. In any case though, he is serving as our companion.)

Ah, indeed, Tobio thought as he struck his palm in comprehension.

Given that, when he had been a junior high school student himself, he recalled suffering from a similar condition, it was easy to understand the youth's speech and behavior.

It seemed certain that he was perhaps in possession of a Sacred Gear or could use magical power. Furthermore he was from the bloodline of the Maou, and also was called a legendary dragon.

Possessing such supernatural power at his age, Tobio understood that such symptoms couldn't be helped.

——And, while looking over at them, Vali began muttering aloud to himself.

"……Right, I understand. This is all for this time. Anything more would amount to nothing."

With that highly interested observation, noticing their gaze, he spoke with pretension.

"Your 'dog' responds to the dragon that is within me."

"……'The dragon that is within me'……?"

In response to Tobio's inquiry Vali spoke while pointing his thumb at his chest.

"Didn't I say it? I carry a legendary dragon within my body. After all I did talk about that guy already."

……Indeed, he had talked about that huh. That……can't be helped. It seems that at his age, Tobio had to force himself to comprehend such things.

Natsume spoke while poking him.

(That kind of setting, it's probable. Completely!)[18]

"……Y-yeah, now, it would be good if we could speak with this dragon."

While forcing his face into a smile, Tobio replied as such.

"Fufu, isn't that inexcusably superficial? I am a dragon, right."

He shouldn't demolish the youth's dream settings. Such things are transient. It was acceptable to just observe until he recovered, not because forcibly repudiating it with reality was unreasonable, but rather because it would have a completely negative influence on the youth's mental growth.

——Then, Lavinia appeared on the rooftop before anyone could realize it. Acquainted with Vali, she stroked his head.

"Good boy good boy, Va-kun."

[18] I think she's saying how it seems likely that Vali has "2nd year of junior high school sickness"

Vali shook of her hand.

“D-don’t stroke me! I’m not a child!”

Ooh, now this way of getting mad was appropriate for his age. His tone was more natural. Likewise, his “2nd year of junior high sickness”-like behavior until now seems to have just been him just putting on airs.

In this short time, it seems that he had come to understand a few things about this boy named Vali.

Lavinia spoke.

“It is time for breakfast. Let us all eat. Shark has just woken up.”

——Well, that said it was he himself who would be making breakfast, the implication being that he had consented to repeatedly be in charge of preparing food going forward.

Vali spoke while stroking his chin.

“Oi, Ikuse Tobio. It’ll be rewarding if you accompany me. ——I can give you days-worth of the phosphorus food ‘Welsh Onion Miso Ramen’. It’s special.”

……How condescending of this young boy to treat someone to cup ramen. Though it was not at all possible to say that, and since it seemed that he had good intentions, he had no intention of denying him.

“A-ah, let’s eat.”

Furthermore it seems that he ought to prepare home cooking for five people…….

“Geez, can you not resist something as great as cup noodles?”

While Natsume was sighing while speaking to Vali, the person himself——

“Whatever enters the stomach is the same. Pouring boiling water into cup noodles only takes three minutes. In regards to situations where one seeks to immediately satisfy their hunger, there is nothing else better suited.”

Merely replied as such. The youth had an apparently quite peculiar life theory. However, as Natsume said cup noodles at his age were unhealthy. It was good that preparing breakfast was his duty Tobio thought to himself.

Natsume, letting out another big sigh, left her shoulders droop.

“In any case, let’s tidy up. Even though there are no residents in this condominium other than us, I feel the condition of this place is much too poor.”

Tobio was especially embarrassed by the disastrous scene of the rooftop. The rooftop had been filled with distorted blades. Well, what would they do about this…….

Sleepily, Jin who was beside him yawned.

Chapter 5 – Reunion / Utsusemi

Part 1

For those dwelling in the condominium, it had been three days since they met their new companion (?), the silver haired youth Vali——.

“Jin? Jin, where are you?”

Early in the morning, right after Tobio woke up, he noticed that something had changed.

——Jin wasn’t beside him.

Since manifesting before his eyes, the puppy had never gone far from his side. Feeling a bad premonition, Tobio investigated under the bed to as far away as the verandah……. 'By some chance, is he just hiding himself' he thought, raising his voice, while also praying silently in his mind, but either way he had left and not come back.

……The possibility that he had vanished, Tobio realized this wasn't the case, as he could sense that they weren't far apart. When speaking of presence, this was something that could only be sensed outside of the five senses. Day by day this sense had grown stronger.

He kept in mind that, whenever he had called him in the past three days, Jin's figure had immediately appeared. However, since this did not match up with the events of this morning.....in what kind of situation would Jin not come when called despite being close by? Despite having no idea what was going on, Tobio left the room to search for Jin.

The door to the room was not locked. No, he was sure he had locked it before going to bed. However, since the door was not locked as he was presently leaving the room, the thought occurred to him that perhaps Jin had unlocked it. It would be amazing if an ordinary dog could accomplish such a feat, but for Jin the protuberance from his forehead was at least capable of releasing the lock.

Somehow sensing that Jin was neither on the communal floor nor in the kitchenette, he hastily walked towards Natsume's room. He went to ring the buzzer……but the door was partly open. Feeling puzzled, Tobio timidly rang the buzzer. However, there was no reply. ——But, from within he could just make out the sound of someone talking.

"——————"

"——————!!"

It was the voices of two girls. ……Since one was likely Natsume given as it was her room, wouldn't that make the one with her Lavinia? For some reason their voices weren't all that loud. Just as Tobio was thinking

about that, the door to the room was suddenly thrown open with a BAM.

Rushing through the partly opened door——was Jin! His whole body was soaking wet. Upon seeing his master Tobio, he turned back and vigorously began shaking his whole body. Tobio was blinded by a spray of water.

“Jin, I was looking for you. ……Were you taking a bath?”

While he himself had been sleeping he had slipped out of the room and proceeded to Natsume’s was what Tobio understood about the situation. As it was, it seemed he had been given a bath. Come to think of it, he never given him a bath since they first met. He wasn't an ordinary dog, yet nevertheless Tobio felt this was a regrettable point.

“……Ikuse-kun?”

Suddenly Natsume’s voice was heard. Tobio, turning towards the voice——through the door that had previously been thrown completely open, saw a completely nude young lady standing in the hallway.

……With a slender body, such a figure was standing there. And yet, there was a mass there that he had not previously noticed when clothed. At the unexpected event, both Tobio and Natsume’s entire bodies became completely stiff……furthermore, as if to deliver a final blow, one more young lady came into sight.

“What is it Toby? We were just welcoming Jin-chan.”

From the bathroom appeared a naked blond girl——Lavinia! This one’s body stressed curves appropriate for a woman that didn't lose to Natsume. That which hadn’t become clear that time she appeared in his bed, it was now clearly visible.

“……NA, NANANANANANANA”

Steadily getting red in the face from the current situation, Natsume finally sprung back into the bathroom. Lowering his head and saying

“Sorry!” in apology was something Tobio didn't get a chance to do. By no means, when he had been on the other side of the partly opened door, could he have predicted such a situation occurring.

Natsume screamed from the bathroom.

“……When I wake up in the morning, Lavinia is always openly sleeping in my room! But, this time she was sleeping while holding Jin-chan! Such being the case……everyone was taking a shower together……yeah ugh!”

Natsume was trembling as she gave an explanation. This was only natural. To be seen naked by a member of the opposite who’s the same age, any girl would be trembling. It was the same for Tobio.

However, there was just one person present whose mood could not be read. Lavinia, while nude, exited through the door and took Tobio’s hand.

“Come take a shower Toby.”

Instead of concealing her naked body she made such a proposal. Unable to resist, Tobio faced Natsume and shrieked.

“Minagawa-san! Lavinia-san stop already!!”

For a healthy young man in this apartment, some might see this as a blessing, while others might see it as a trial.

That morning, they all gathered in the usual video viewing room——Tobio, Natsume, Samjima, Lavinia, and Vali.

“……Geez, for you to be showing such a face here, what exactly happened…….”

Samejima was grumbling like that with half closed eyes. There was a sense of Tobio and Natsume being strangely distant. This change in the pair’s attitudes wasn’t at all peculiar. After all, Jin had slipped out of the

room in the middle of the night, been caught by the half-asleep Lavinia who had exited her own room, and had entered Natsume's abode. Surprised by this chronology, his curiousity over Jin's behavior was inexhaustible. ……Did he just go for a midnight stroll?

Even after such things had happened that morning, Tobio still finished the preparations for breakfast.

Dish after dish had been set up on the table. On today's program, sunny-side up eggs with sautéed sausage and spinach garnish, grilled salmon fillet, a tossed salad, and delectably commonplace miso soup were all on the menu. On top of that, the stock used for the miso soup, as well as the sunny-side up eggs, the sausage, and the salmon fillet, all were perfect without being even the slightest bit burnt. The white rice too, having been boiled in a dedicated pressure cooker, the outcome was not the least overcooked, with every single grain of rice having risen magnificently. Incidentally, the salad had been topped with Tobio's handmade dressing.

"Is it okay that I wasn't able to prepare anything other than this?"

Tobio timidly uttered such words. Speaking honestly, having previously not eaten anything not personally made by his deceased grandmother or childhood friend Sae, he lacked confidence when it came to preparing an entire meal.

However, with it being identified as something resembling a decent meal, Natsume was filled with delight.

"WOAH! As expected, it was the right decision putting Ikuse-kun on cooking duty!"

Before everyone could say 'itadakimasu' Samejima was slurping the miso soup. At that moment he put on a broad smile.

"In any case, this is scrumptious."

This was muttered with poor speech. Much like Samejima, Lavinia could do nothing but gape.

“Tobi’s cooking is the greatest.”

After saying “Itadakimasu”, Natsume quickly reached out with her chopsticks.

“Uum, delicious!”

Natsume’s assessment was that today’s was the best yet. With the result that no one could stop their chopsticks, it seemed this morning’s menu was a big success; Tobio sighed in relief at this. Since being appointed to food duty, Tobio had been endeavoring to produce a menu that wasn’t harmful to everyone’s health. For the members who were present these excellent circumstances would be left behind in the near future. So he had made up his mind that he should prepare something like a decent meal for them.

——Then, watching Vali’s figure as he moved his chopsticks in silence, Natsume wore a mischievous expression.

“What’s this, Va-kun, aren’t you surprisingly engrossed with eating? Weren’t cup noodles all that was necessary for a meal?”

“……You misunderstand. I was only interested in obtaining nourishment from this meal.”

“It comes back to nourishment huh. Good grief, you’re not honest at all.”

Natsume started cackling. Vali, without putting down his chopsticks, had voiced his objection. Indeed, for a boy his age it was unhealthy to only eat cup noodles from morning till evening. If such a mundane meal was good, Tobio felt it would be beneficial for this child to eat this way every day.

Seeing this exchange with Natsume, Samejima let out a laugh with a “Kukuku.”

“Lucidra-sensei's at the height of his cheekiness.”

“Muu, Samejima Kouki. What’s with this Lucidra? It that supposed to be me?”

Vali raised his eyebrows inquiringly at Samejima.

“Yeah, aren’t you Lucifer and a dragon? In that case, Lucidra is good for short ain’t it?”

Hurt by the humor in Samejima’s words, the corners of Vali’s mouth lowered into a frown.

“Mumuu, change it. I am of the bloodline of the Maou Lucifer, and also carry the legendary dragon known as the “Vanishing Dragon” within my body——.”

“Ah, yes of course. Lucidra Lucidra.”

In response to Samejima making light of Vali’s “settings”[19] the boy finally cried out.

“Muu, Minagawa Natsume. It is unacceptable that this insubordinate comrade not be more strongly warned about my valuable nature.”

At the childish exchange between Samejima and Vali Natsume could only sigh.

“Geez, no fighting during a meal.”

Natsume tossed one of the sausages to Griffon, which the bird skillfully caught and gulped down.The independent avatar types consisting of Jin, Griffon, and Byakusa also partook of meals, just like ordinary animals——though there is no need to worry about things like hawk, cat, or dog food, as they eat everything given to them from meat to fruit. Since they hadn’t observed any abnormalities up till now, it was likely there weren’t any restrictions like there would be on a real animal.

[19] TN: As in personal history

In the first place, whether it was even necessary for Jin and the others to eat, of this Tobio was not sure. For now, until they could discuss it with the 'Governor General', they were just going to ask around.

"Va-kun, good boy good boy."

Lavinia was patting the pouting Vali's head.

"Like I said, don't pat my head! I am not a child!"

This normally cool-headed boy, after only a little teasing, was displaying a face appropriate for his age.

Unexpectedly, as far as Tobio was concerned this mealtime scenery was quite relaxing.

After each of them had finished their meal, the meeting commenced.

——After three whole days had passed, it was finally time to decide upon their next course of action.

"And so, what're we gonna do? We gonna do something today?"

Gulping down his after meal coffee all at once, Samejima inquired of Tobio and co.

Natsume nodded, and spread the aforementioned file from the 'Governor General' out on top of the table. There were notes written around a certain region on the map.

Natsume spoke regarding the map.

"Yes, we taking action. First of all, as we previously discussed, we'll be investigating the whereabouts of the bereaved families of our fellow students."

Indeed, three days earlier Natsume had pointed out that, regarding the bereaved families of the fellow students that had been turned into

Utsusemi, they had mysteriously changed residences. It had not been determined where the families had gone.

“Since the time of the great accident, this ridiculous story of mass disappearance has not been noticed by the media.”

This was roughly what Natsume had said before. This was only a domestic disturbance. Since all of the bereaved families had gone, one would expect the media to have noticed it. However, it wasn’t being reported on. It was to the unnatural extent that there wasn’t even any gossip about it.

“……The Agency, that is those that were previously from the Five Principal Clans are controlling the information or something?”

Tobio asked like this. This was the group with supernatural powers that had been part of the underside of this country since antiquity. Tobio felt that with that unusual power something of that extent was not impossible.

To this Natsume nodded her head in confirmation.

“……So for example if some journalist were to even become suspicious, it seems that they'd be erased.”

“I am all but certain that they would be erased.”

Lavinia calmly spoke such frightening words.

Vali spoke while folding his arms.

“For those who were deemed deficient from among the members of that foundation——those of the lineage of the Five Principal Clans, it is an absolute commandment redress such deficiencies. The exiles belonging to the ‘Utsusemi Agency’, it would seem they are composed of people who were purged by the present Five Principal Clans. Simultaneously, the people from the Clans have started to erase that agency of deficient individuals. That is to say, their stance is to not exempt even those who merely have come into contact with the Five Principal Clans.”

……Those who become involved, they would be completely erased then? In that case, those that were in the agency, they included those who had become involved in the 'Four Fiends Project' for the sake of triumphing over the Clans……? In that case, then they themselves as well——.

"……"

"……"

Arriving at the same thought as himself, Natsume and Samejima's expressions became subdued. Not just themselves, it seemed they were also concerned about their close friends who had been unexpectedly drawn in.

Concerning the family members of Natsume and Samejima, not much was said. Regarding the circumstances of where those two were born and raised, it was a topic they didn't want to discuss. However, the organization of that 'Governor General' has been placing the people close to the survivors, like the 'Four Fiends', under their protection, so the present situation was that they should be able to immediately know if the 'Utsusemi Agency' were to try to lay a hand on them.

It was simply the 'present situation'. Hereafter, with circumstances continually changing, without warning something may happen that it's impossible to protect them from. It wasn't unlikely that they might abduct their families and make use of them for the sake of luring them out.

It would appear to be fortune born from within misfortune that Tobio no longer had anyone he could call a blood relative. At the time when his grandmother had died, Tobio had lost anything he could call family. But, regarding himself……he was connected to 'Himejima'. Whoever those guys were there was a likelihood he would be seeing them. ……Hereafter, it would not be strange if they targeted him for that reason.

After shaking her head, Natsume continued speaking.

“Either way we mustn’t simply act aimlessly or we will fail to overturn the present situation. ——Let us take action.”

Tobio agreed with that opinion. If they didn’t act, he could never meet up with Sae. If he were to simply curl up in fright in this situation, he would never be able to reunite with her.

Natsume continued the conversation.

“I think we should visit the homes of our fellow students that have been vacated. We might be able to find some clues. ……That everything would have vanished is surely impossible. Besides——“

Natsume directed her gaze towards Lavinia. Lavinia nodded once.

“Indeed, by going to those homes, I can make use of investigative magic. Surely, I believe I can find something.”

She could use magic to investigate, huh. However, Lavinia’s goals still had many mysteries. Those people her organization was supposedly pursuing, they were cooperating with the ‘Utsusemi Agency’……. Those exiles from the Five Principal Clans, just how far did their influence extend……?

A group with supernatural abilities, magicians……. An unknown world, strange events……. How comforting it would be if it all turned out to be a dream.

Samejima asked Natsume.

“Within the same grade as us, there are over two hundred others. Which place d'you believe we should choose? Just choose one at random?”

“That is——“

As Natsume was hesitating to speak, she looked over at Tobio.

Part 2

Having traveled by train and by bus, they had arrived in the vicinity of their destination from which they began walking towards a residential area. A short distance up the main street was the house of Toujou Sae. The house was a monotonous two-story building.

Indeed, Tobio and company had agreed to go to Sae's house. This was based on Natsume's intuition.

Natsume had said at the condominium.

"Those guys mentioned the names of Samejima-kun's companion and Ikuse-kun's childhood friend. From among our fellow students they at least recognized that they were people especially close to us. That is to say——"

Tobio continued her words.

"They probably expect that we are likely to show up at a place we have a connection to."

Natsume nodded her head.

So while they were proceeding to their destination, there was also a significant chance of an extreme emergency due to them having laid a trap. They had already lured out two of their leaders and seen their faces, and since then had become to some extent aware of the details of their plan.

In comparison, those guys were growing in power day by day. While remaining cautious of those guys, it wouldn't be at all amusing if they were watching this place they had aconnection to in order to spring a trap on them.

Up till now they had had the cooperation the 'Governor General's' organization——the Grigori who were also observing those guys. The inexplicable action of all the bereaved families of their fellow students

moving away simultaneously, this seems to have been within their expectations.

Natsume spoke.

“Apart from that though, since they would understand that we would try to rescue our friends and acquaintances, they know that we won’t just remain in hiding.”

Samejima shrugged.

“Since we've been furnished with power, it’s obvious those guys would use places we’re clearly connected to as bait for a trap.”

While nodding towards Tobio, Natusme clearly declared.

“Even greater than this power we have been furnished with is the irregular that is Ikuse-kun who has become involved in this situation……given that this is the case, wouldn’t laying a trap be the minimum we could expect them to attempt? Even if it is quite frightening, we must proceed if there is a chance of finding clues in the homes of our fellow classmates. Either way, I believe that probability of finding something connected to them is high.”

Such being the significance of visiting their fellow students’ homes, that’s why you’re so hopeful for progress huh. ……Putting aside the last of what Natsume said, the former part about how “that being the least they would attempt” was indeed a frightening expectation.

However, if you think about it from that side’s perspective, all of their traps so far have been ineffective so it seems there next move would be different. This would seem to imply that this time the attack would exceed the previous ones.

……With the power they had been furnished with, it would become a fierce battle……. He had made excellent accomplishments during his special training for the past three days……you could say that his blade had been tempered. He was getting closer to Sae one step at a time, but on the other hand his anxiety had grown.

And now, as a result of the discussion at the condominium, they were now traveling to Sae's house on foot. The reason, while it was certainly to uncover clues relating to the relocations, above all else for Tobio——it was to search for something that was connected to his grandmother.

"……Baa-chan had been intimate with Sae's parents, as when she was alive they would often be heard speaking about various things relating to after her death."

Indeed, after his grandmother's funeral, he had been summoned by Sae's parents, and was informed of what had been requested of them. From practical life needs to financial needs, it was wide-ranging.

Within that was also contained an entreaty that she wished for her grandchild to be shown something when he grew up, which she had informed them of in advance.

Sae's parents had not been in touch with him as a result of the relocations, so their current location was unclear. Now that he thought about it, Sae's prosperous Oji-chan and Oba-chan[20] had also gone on a journey without so much as a farewell greeting, so it was impossible for there to not be some reference to heirlooms his grandmother had left behind. After the shock of losing Sae, when Oji-chan and Oba-chan to arbitrarily distance themselves from him it had filled his kind-spirited mind with fury.

Because of that, Tobio had believed that these heirlooms had become lost. It now appeared that these items were still at Sae's house. Even thought they had already moved away there did not appear to be anyone living in that house……. However, if the search for confirming their destination was successful the chances of finding them would be even higher.

These items left behind by his grandmother might be somehow related to the 'Himejima', or else perhaps connected to his supernatural power. In the case of the former, some dangerous information regarding their

[20] Literally uncle and aunt but here is used by Tobio to refer to Sae's parents

opponents and his ancestry would become known. In the case of the latter the nature of Jin's ability would become clear.

Presently, for Tobio and company it's just as important to learn about his own ability as it is to find information relating to their opponents. Taking that into account, all members had agreed to go to Sae's house.

However, only Vali,

"Sorry, I have a personal request from the 'Governor General' which I am in position not to listen to. Today, I am not able to act together with you guys."

Leaving behind such words, he had left the condominium before them.

As a result, only the foursome of Tobio, Natsume, Samjima, and Lavinia were en route to Sae's house. For Samejima who was used to traveling by motorcycle, when they traveled by train,

"……In no way can I become used to taking the train."

So he grumbled.

And so, the foursome had up till now been traveling and had now arrived in front of Sae's house…….

Even just observing from a short distance away, there was no sense at all that anyone lived in this house. The windows were all shut and the name plate on the door had vanished. The grass on the lawn had grown unkempt.

He remembered how Oba-chan would water flowers in the garden. Oji-chan would sit on a chair in the garden on holidays reading a book.

In this garden, this was where he had had that hard fight against the golden retriever……Tobio missed such things.

While recalling that incident, he remembered Sae's smiling face. Looking at this house of hers was bringing his memories of her to the surface, his

chest tightened, and for a moment he stopped investigating the house. Changing his mood, he resumed his survey of the house.

As far as he could sense, there wasn't any human presence in the vicinity of the house. Presently they were the only ones present, which felt extremely lonesome. Even though it was daytime, it had a dark atmosphere. Previously this had not been the case. However, the present surroundings did not transmit a feeling that people lived here.

The foursome, opening the gate, proceeded until they had set foot jump in front of the front door. They then confirmed whether the lock was secured. The front door opened easily. With Tobio and Natsume understanding what it meant for the lock to not be secured, the group exchanged glances.

Samejima spoke while looking up at the house.

"……If there was nobody already living here, one would think the locks would be shut. Unless, that is, if the landlord of this location is incompetent."

While speaking such sarcasm he placed the white cat on his shoulder. It was good to emphasize caution when you don't know when something might happen.

Like that, they checked to see whether or not there were traps.

Lavinia spoke.

"Rather than that, this whole area has been covered by a magical technique to drive people away with this house at the epicenter. It has been made so that exempting people with special powers like us it is impossible to perceive, the significance of this this being that they have absolute and complete control. Houjutsu[21], Shintoism, and Onmyoudou are systems that excel in 'exorcism' powers such 'concealment' and 'repulsion'."

[21] Japanese magical arts

……That is to say, it's been made so that ordinary people are unable to perceive this house, huh? That we are capable of perceiving this house, this is because we possess Sacred Gears and magic? However, in that case it wouldn't just be this house, but it is also predictable that the houses of the other fellow students had become subject to the same conditions.

The Sacred Gears——Jin and Griffon were in position nearby. It being unknown what would be here, they had temporarily traveled while avoiding the public eye, this being Utsusemi domain. It wouldn't be strange for them to be attacked at any moment. Even though they had done so, it was possible that the Utsusemi were approaching them from behind.

Timidly opening door, they trespassed upon the entryway. In the entryway, Tobio looked at the various accessories and framed pictures. They brought back how this scenery had looked in the past.

……Although it was said they moved away, none of their belonging were moved with them? This action conducted by the 'Utsusemi Agency', it doesn't seem at all like a simple relocation.

As a result of being completely closed off, the house's interior was dim despite it being daytime. The foursome voluntarily entered this interior. They did not remove their shoes at the entrance. There was no telling when they'd have to make a run for it.

Natsume turned on a flashlight, illuminating the dark interior.

To start with, she began with the closest room. Calmly turning the doorknob, she opened the door slightly and shined the light over the interior. ——There appeared to be nothing.

Inside was a table and a sofa. Nothing had been relocated from within. What had been moved was——the people. Only Sae's parents. In all likelihood, this was the case at the rest of their fellow students' houses.

"Split up, let's investigate. If you find anything, contact us through Lavinia's magic as usual."

Tobio and company nodded in response to Natsume's comment, the glowing crystals produced by Lavinia's magic were inserted into their ears, and splitting into two groups to search the interior they advanced on foot.

The team of Tobio and Lavinia opened the door to the living room. A TV, a table, and a withered decorative plant were visible. The leaves had fallen from the decorative plant, and were scattered all over the floor.

In the kitchen, the electronic appliances such as the refrigerator and microwave had all been left behind. The electricity having been cut, the resulting condition inside the refrigerator was one of rotten food that was releasing an offensive smell. Turning the water faucet, as one would expect no water came out.

"……"

Sometimes, Lavinia would stop and draw a circle on the floor with her wand and say something that appeared similar to a spell. As light emerged from the circle that had been traced on the floor, shortly after the momentary brilliance would be emitted it would go out.

……Magic, or so it would seem. When he had asked earlier about what she was doing, it seemed she was investigating the movements of the inhabitants.

Hearing footsteps, they became vigilant, but it was only Natsume and Samejima who appeared. Confirming with them, they shook their heads. They hadn't discovered anything that way.

Setting out from the central living room, the foursome again began surveying the vicinity.

"This place, was it like this previously?"

Tobio nodded in response to Natsume's query.

“Yeah, it’s as it was. Nothing has been moved. The only things that aren’t here——are Oji-san and Oba-san.”

That was Tobio’s reply. The things had been left behind, and only the residents were not currently present. That is to say, that which the ‘Utsusemi Agency’ desired was only the blood relatives of the second year Ryoukuu High School students——. What the significance of that was, Tobio and company had no idea, but they couldn’t help but feel a bad premonition about it.

Tobio pointed his index finger up.

“I’m going to investigate the second floor.”

In response to Tobio’s suggestion, Natsume replied, “Well then, we’ll continue investigating the situation of the first floor for a little longer,” and the four people once again separated.

Tobio and Lavinia, returning momentarily to the entrance hall, began ascending the stairs. He spotted something possessing a human-like appearance on the second floor. Glancing over at Lavinia, she had seen the same thing, her gaze directed upwards. She seized her ear and said.

“……Natsume, Shark, I want you to be cautious.”

This was an announcement of preparation for battle. In an instant a tense atmosphere dominated the house.

“……Jin.”

Tobio, calmly summoning his partner, gave such an order. As he swallowed his saliva, the puppy ascended the stairs from behind him.

With all the effort in his small body Jin ascended one step at a time. Reaching the second floor first, his nose sniffing began sniffing around. Discovering it was nothing, he turned towards them with his tail wagging. A little relieved, Tobio ascended the stairs.

Jin was clearly a great asset. For such a small body, he provided much reassurance. If it had just been him by himself, he would have been overwhelmed with fear at the sight of that human silhouette, and likely would have started to panic.

In the midst of his nervousness, his mind was stirred with the aid of Jin and his colleagues.

Having ascended to the second floor, Tobio turned his feet towards Sae's room. Progressing conspicuously through the dusty corridor, he slowly turned the doorknob to Sae's room.

This room, he'd been in here so many times. It was clearly nothing more than a typical girl's room, the interior of which had been kept tidy and was clean.

The bed and the desk were as they had been. On top of the desk, nothing had been placed. Tobio, who was familiar with this desk, opened the drawer. It held some study materials and notebooks.

Searching through Sae's desk almost made him lose his nerve, but even so he opened the drawer, and Tobio recognized a certain notebook. What he took out was Sae's diary.

Holding it in his hand, he began flipping through the pages. It was a silly diary. Reading the numerous descriptions relating to himself made him feel embarrassed from the bottom of his heart, so he couldn't look at them directly. However, each and every detail that had been written was amusingly funny.

He stopped at the entry from the day before the trip.

'May: Tomorrow is finally the formal day of the trip to Hawaii, however Tobio's condition hasn't fully recovered. I had wanted for us to go together, but it can't be helped. Tomorrow, after only seeing Tobio's face in the morning, I expect I'll head to the airport. Tomorrow will be here soon. If I don't go sleep early'

Right after that day's description, the diary was interrupted. It was natural. Since the owner was presently absent——.

After Lavinia finished engraving her magic into the floor, they left Sae's room, and Tobio and company began heading towards Oji-chan and Oba-chan's room.

Inside the second floor room belonging to Sae's parents——. ……Since the family had disappeared, and since this included Sae's parents, in regards to the item Tobio's grandmother had entrusted to Sae's parents, this was only remaining place in the house where it could likely be.

Having entered Sae's parents' room, Tobio began searching the drawers and shelves while feeling apologetic. However, it seemed that it absolutely could not be found. ——Then, he discovered a safe inside of the closet. Perhaps here……Tobio had such thoughts.

At that moment, the door to the room opened with a *kii* sound. Tobio and Lavinia looked over that way, where there was a single young girl standing on the other side of the door. That figure was recognizable. It was obvious.

"Sae!"

Appearing right in front of his eyes, this person was his childhood friend Sae. She was *jii* staring in his direction.

……At last, we've met up!

His eyes moistening, driven by a sudden desire to immediately rush over to her, he frantically resisted.

"Sae, it's me. Can you understand me?"

However, despite Tobio's cry, the figure he had perceived over there, Sae, showed no change. Before his eyes Sae was merely wearing a thin ominous smile. Tobio's gaze perceived something.

The prayer beads on her left hand——.

That, it was something recognizable. It was the precious prayer beads he'd inherited from his grandmother. It was something he'd passed to Sae before the trip.

Tobio could do nothing but show a sorrowful expression.

Keeping the chronology up until now in mind, she should have become an Utsusemi. If that was the case, there was no point in rescuing her during the present situation.

But, he could not issue simple instructions to Jin. That Sae would be killed, this was not something he could permit.

Sympathizing with the present situation, Lavinia was carefully observing.

"As expected, slaying her is impossible huh."

The voice of a third party was heard from the corridor. Entering the room——was a middle aged man wearing a three piece suit. He was recognizable. Indeed, from that time when they'd battled at the department store. The mysterious man who appeared to assist the guy called Doumon……. That guy had appeared before their eyes.

……This guy, Doumon had called him 'Himejima'.

The tough looking man spoke slowly.

"I am the one called Himejima Hanezu. As you might already be aware, I have undertaken the role of leader of the organization called the 'Utsusemi Agency'."

Indeed, this guy was the head of the organization that began this series of events——.

……Without warning, the opponents' boss has made an appearance. By no means would he have thought for an instant that this man would appear accompanied by Sae.

"……The Five Principal Clans"

Tobio murmured in that way.

Hearing that the man——Himejima Hanezu, put his hand on his chin with great interest.

“Hrm, it seems you’ve received information from that black winged gang. If that’s true then it makes things simple. ——Those of you who possess the ‘Four Fiends’ will be retrieved.”

“……”

He himself was not one of the ‘Four Fiends’. In regards to the plan, he was an irregular existence.

However, the man laughed.

“Of course, you are also something we consider necessary. Ikuse Tobio. ——No, I guess I should call you Himejima Tobio?”

……They’ve already investigated my circumstances.

The man——Himejima Hanezu continued speaking.

It may seem strange to you, but your grandmother——Ageha was a member of the ‘Himejima’ Clan. Unfortunately the Himejima are not overflowing with desire for this power that issued from their family but……”

“……I am Ikuse. Himejima was nothing more than my grandmother’s maiden name.”

“Although you may think so, as far as those in the underside of this country are concerned the Himejima bloodline takes precedence. However, it’s ironic. For the ‘Dog’ to be of the genealogy of one who was expelled from the Clan……”

Himejima Hanezu, looking downwards, gazed at Jin. His pupils were dark, containing absolutely no emotion. Although he had smiled before it gave off the sense that it had been manufactured.

"……Speaking honestly, I believe my only desire has been partly fulfilled. ——Ikuse Tobio, was how you introduced yourself huh. A 'demon' beyond the daughter of 'lightning' has been born from that Himejima. Moreover, it is an authentic creation compared to the aforementioned 'lightning'. The degree of comedy is boundless. Rather than the 'red' of the 'Suzaku[22]' of Shintoism that the Himejima rule over, they've given birth to 'jet black'. Having acknowledged you since your face reminds me of the previous 'Himejima' clan chief, I guess I am sufficiently satisfied."

The man shook his head.

"However, the minds of my own brethren don't think that way. ……I must conform to the 'Project' until the end as the one whose responsibility is to govern that organization."

…….

……What this man is saying is incomprehensible. For Tobio, the things Himejima Hanezu was saying, he couldn't understand them at all. But, he sensed that everything he said was mixed with deep-seated enmity.

The man continued without caring.

"Ikuse Tobio, why not lend us your power? No, for argument's sake, apart from cutting us down, for the present——instead of us, why not overthrow those monsters from the Five Principal Clans?"

"……You're saying what's convenient for you. Moreover I don't understand the significance of that……!!"

Tobio expressed his displeasure at his unilateral way of speaking. To think that it had reached the point of him speaking of him lending his power this late in the game……!! More than anything else, to proclaim such ridiculous words while Sae was beside him, rather than assuaging his feelings, it was intolerable.

[22] Vermillion Bird

Seeing that, the first emotion that man showed was to put on that pleasant smile.

"……Draw that ominous blade of yours, and you shall be made aware of my responsibility."

The man gestured with his finger. At that instant——Sae, who had been standing beside Himejima Hanezu, took one step forward, her left hand slashing horizontally. Thereupon, the shadow at her feet began to wriggle as though it possessed intention, spreading throughout the room. The darkness in the room was being controlled. The shadow that had spread out bulged, forming a figure.

"——That's"

Tobio could do no more that to widen his eyes in shock at what appeared before him——filling almost the entire room was a single enormous wild beast. Jet black fur——it was the mane of a lion. Its body appeared to be larger than the Barbary Lion which is the largest lion. Its flashing golden eyes were filled with bloodlust. Baring its bare sharp fangs, it raised a low growl.

Through the pores all over his body, a chilling sensation was transmitted——. Since the pressure was seemingly piercing through his skin, Tobio was forced to realize it. ……This lion, it was different from all the Utsusemi he had fought up until now. From the basic 'structure', it was a monster on a whole other level——.

With Tobio's whole body trembling with fear, only Jin boldly faced the lion, completely without fear, and not relaxing his menacing posture. Without understanding the difference of his opponent's power he did not pointlessly raise a growl.

——For the sake of protecting the master, he confronted it while frantically pumping up his small body.

Regarding Jin's state of excessively brave loyalty, Tobio was deeply moved by this behavior to the point that he was no longer shaking in

fear in the least. In such a situation, he would not betray Jin's courage. He absolutely would not. It was his duty as this puppy's master.

Himejima Hanezu spoke from beside the lion that had appeared from Sae's shadow.

"……This was developed by a group of magicians who are cooperating with us. ——It's called the 'Cowardly Leo'. This one experiment is the bearer of the nucleus of our 'Four Fiends Project'. Toujou Sae alone was the only test subject who could adapt to it."

……Sae is commanding this lion? The atmosphere that lion is releasing, the killing intent enveloping its body is keenly distinguishable.

Lavinia scowled at the lion with a rare face of annoyance and spoke to the man.

"……Lion……one of the three has already finished being manifested? This is the reality behind 'their' experiment[23]?"

"……The young lady of Grau Zauberer[24]. What I report to you at this time, it would be good if you could convey it to Lord Pheles. ——They are serious."

Hearing that Lavinia let out a voice of complete displeasure.

"……How utterly unpleasant."

As Lavinia pointed her wand at the man, Tobio heard Natsume's voice through the magical communicator in his ear.

'Ikuse-kun! The house, it's been surrounded!'

——!!

Hearing that Tobio turned around. Turning towards the room's verandah, he caught sight of a monster——an Utsusemi accompanied by the figure one of his fellow students there. Its hostile gaze was

[23] The 'their' used here is feminine

[24] Grau Zauberer is German for Grey Magician, which is also the reading of the Kanji used

releasing a thirst for blood. Arriving on the verandah of the second floor, in the house's surroundings, as well as in the garden, it seemed there was no mistaking that there was a swarm of Utsusemi.

He gave Himejima Hanezu a fleeting glance. The man shrugged his shoulders.

"You want to quarrel with me here? It doesn't particularly matter to me. ——But, one suggestion."

The man raised one finger as he continued to talk.

"If it's okay with all of you, we could show you around our research facility. All of your fellow students you're looking for are on standby there, along with their relatives who are in good health. Consider first, with this lion, and the house being surrounded by an abundance of Utsusemi, I'm sorry to say there's no safe way out. Given that this is the case, can we ask that you come along as peacefully as possible?"

Meaning that they were being personally invited to their hideout. But then, there was no doubt they would be taken as unconditional captives……. However, they were wholeheartedly pursuing the truth behind that location.

——Was this a chance, or was this a desperate situation?

Either way, cutting their way out of here would come with a sacrifice. Regarding victory……in all honesty, such an outcome was unreasonable. Notwithstanding the restricted conditions of the 'Blade from the Shadows', even though he'd been learning over the past three days, with this lion and Himejima Hanezu in front of them, he was certainly lacking decisive power.

Even in the case that man called Doumon, he possessed more power than a multitude of Utsusemi. As the man who commanded those of such supernatural power, the possibility that he was weaker than Doumon was nonexistent.

More than anything else, in the confined space of this room, the 'Blade from the Shadows' would appear to be an ordinary attack, due to the restriction on mobility. Even though Jin possessed a small body it would seem that his movements would be slightly affected……the chance of injuring Sae as well was far too high.

……Then, should we escape? No, even supposing we escaped, someone would invariably be seriously injured.

…….

……In no way losing interest in the current circumstances, Himejima Hanezu took something out of his breast pocket.

——It was a square wooden box.

There were talisman with magical characters affixed to the box. Seeing that, Tobio instantly reached a thought.

That, it must be what his grandmother passed to Sae's parents which is connected to his roots——.

Himejima Hanezu spoke.

"There is something contained within this strongbox. I have been borrowing it for some time. What it is, I haven't checked at this point. Is it the same for you, Ikuse Tobio-kun? In terms of the contents——"

The man pointed his finger at Sae.

"Which one you desire more I wonder?"

The man's calm way of speaking was affecting his nerves. ……Directing his sights towards Sae, her eyes didn't contain any emotion towards Tobio.

Lavinia spoke to Tobio.

"……I entrust this decision to Toby. Surely, Natsume and Shark will also understand. If I can also speak honestly, I am frightfully curious about their institution."

As though sensing Tobio's inner thoughts Lavinia had spoken thus.

After several second Tobio bowed his head, his face showing an expression that was full of bitterness, and grasped his ear to instruct Natsume and Samejima.

"……Minagawa-san, Samejima. ——Withdraw from here! Leave without minding us! We'll meet up afterwards without fail!"

What Tobio chose——was for Natusme and Samejima to get away. They couldn't have all of their members go. He thought it would be a better if they had multiple options. He and Lavinia would remain for the sake of Natsume and Samejima escaping. The final goal of those guys was the 'Four Fiends'. In that case, the two who are included in that ought to be the ones to get away.

'——!! Ju-just a minute, Ikuse-kun!? What you said——'

'Ikuse! What happened up there!?'

In contrast to the surprised Natsume, Samejima seemed to somehow or another suspect Tobio's true intentions.

'Let's go, Birdbrain! It seems that magical girl together with the distinguished Ikuse have gotten themselves into a situation! In that case, since those guys outside were drawn to gather here for us, it seems we ought to beat them all down in one go.'

'B-but! Aah geez! Ikuse-kun, Lavinia, I forbid you to die okay! We will absolutely welcome you back!'

Listening to the voice of his comrades as they departed while repulsing the Utsusemi, Tobio glared at the man.

The man exhaled.

“Indeed, since it’s only us who remain, the ‘Four Fiends’ will get away huh. Whether for all member to fight, or for all members to escape, both are far from prudent decisions.”

Himejima Hanezu, saying this, tied some kind of token to his hand and the space inside the room warped. From the warped space a fusuma[25] appeared. A scarlet divine bird had been elegantly painted on it. The fusuma opened, and before them they perceived a single room in an unfamiliar building. It seemed to be something like a ‘gate’ for crossing between locations by linking one point to another.

Himejima Hanezu made an inviting gesture while speaking to Tobio and Lavinia.

“Well now, after you.”

Holding Jin in his arms Tobio addressed him in his thoughts.

——Jin, please accompany me to the bitter end. I, by defeating these guys from within the whale’s belly, will save Sae and everyone.

In spite of the fear that was clinging to his body, Tobio’s fighting spirit did not waver.

Chapter 6 - Ice Princess/Four Fiends

Part 1

Having passed through the unusual fusumu that had appeared at Toujou Sae’s house, Tobio and Lavinia had been invited to the building serving as headquarters for the Utsusemi Agency.

As soon as they set foot there, they were surrounded by a crowd of fellow classmates who had been turned into Utsusemi. ……Visually

[25] Japanese sliding screen

confirming their numbers, it could be estimated that there were scores of them at least. With amount that Tobio and company had defeated so far, and guessing at the number that had previously surrounded Sae's house, in all likelihood, it was possible to assume that all of the remaining people who had been made into Utsusemi were here. Of course, since it was possible to revive the monsters like was done with Sasaki previously there was seemingly no end to them…….

The figures of adults wearing business suits were frequently seen. ……The mood in the eyes and enveloping the bodies of the agency members was visible to them. They were doing things like binding tokens to their hands, or otherwise carrying something like talismans. ……It seems like there were a variety of means for releasing supernatural power.

The blood lust of the multitudes of Utsusemi and agency members turned towards them.

In this situation, Himejima Hanezu, who was beside Sae, wore a disgusting smirk on his face and stated the following.

"——Welcome to the Utsusemi Agency headquarters, no, hidden base."

With nothing more than this, they were driven to rage by such an invitation.

Regarding Tobio and Lavinia, their hands were then placed into handcuffs and restrained. That which is typically called handcuffs, they are equivalent to blocks of iron with holes in them. These handcuffs though had magical sequences written on them. ……Likely because of that, as soon as his hands were cuffed, irresistible chills ran down his entire body. Simultaneously, the throbbing sense from Jin he'd been feeling since before——the spiritual link seemingly weakened.

……As for the aforementioned Jin, he was then placed into a cage behind Tobio and company. That cage was placed on top of a luggage carrier that was being pushed by a male agency member. The cage had the same pattern written on it as the handcuffs. Just as Tobio was

abiding by his current handcuffed state, Jin was also not resisting, and was just calmly sitting inside the cage. However, those deep crimson eyes displayed a brilliance containing dangerous raw hostility. It was apparent through this aspect that he would flare up at merely a single word from Tobio.

Passing through multiple gates requiring authorization, the place the two people and one animal were lead——was a vast chamber.

It was a strange scene with countless of what appeared to cultivation tanks lined up——. The cultivation tanks were connected to capsules laid out horizontally. Throughout this room there were cultivation tanks and capsules visible everywhere.

Himejima Hanezu spoke as they progressed down a prepared path between the cultivation tanks.

“Take a proper look at this.”

Urging him like this, he directed Tobio’s gaze towards a cultivation tank. Thereupon, within the green liquid——he noticed a human being in there. It appeared to be the same for the other tanks, with middle-aged men and women, or otherwise young ones had been placed within them side by side.

“This is……!!”

Himejima Hanezu added one more thing for Tobio, for whom words had failed.

“Those in here, they are the relatives of the boys and girls who were turned into Utsusemi.”

“——!!”

Tobio became speechless at this shocking truth. So these were the parents and siblings of his classmates who disappeared under the pretense of moving? In reality, they’d been brought here and placed inside these things…….

Himejima Hanezu spoke to Tobio.

"You were already aware with how the experimental bodies'——the Ryoukuu High School students' families all changed residence I believe? They are all currently here."

……As expected, all of his classmates' relatives were here. In that case, Sae's parents should be here——. As Tobio was looking around Himejima Hanezu continued explaining.

"Anyway, for the sake of the ongoing examination into the utilization of Utsusemi, manifesting the artificial Sacred Gear can cause irregularities in the experimental body's mind and body. In order to compensate for that, someone of close genetic relation——blood relatives were necessary. For those that become exhausted by utilizing the Utsusemi the bodies of the parents, or possibly the siblings, are used to supplement the recovery. Periodically the experimental body will have to spend a day in these capsules in order to preserve their ability. ……It seems the technique is not yet perfected."

For their classmates, the act of manipulating those artificial independent avatar type Sacred Gears——those monsters, produced such a demerit? And the relatives were assembled to compensate for that…….

They carried this secretive large scale experiment, all for the sake of the Four Fiends Project——to steal the abilities of Natsume and Samejima, and make use of them to triumph over those people from the Clans…….

……So it would appear that this is the purpose of the Utsusemi Agency. However, regarding those who are cooperating with them, is the true purpose of the traitor in the Governor General's organization and one Lavinia is pursuing something else?——Tobio thought. That black lion he had seen at Sae's house, it was clear that though it resembled the Utsusemi, it was a different kind of existence.

In other words, the experiment that was being performed here, it appeared that, for each of the 233, they were the result of intersecting goals. ……This was the origin of the dreadful research for the Four

Fiends project that was being carried out here. The Governor General and Lavinia were trying to prevent this. Speaking of which, Lavinia was looking around the chamber in annoyance. Everything displayed here appeared unpleasant.

Tobio and Lavinia were then urged on, and they entered an elevator. The elevator descended. As they steadily descended, “Where in the world are we descending to?” Tobio was compelled to ask as the elevator came to a stop.

They advanced together with the agency members who were leading them, and came to wait in front of a pair of large double doors. There was a solemn sound as the chief opened it.

The interior——was a huge empty room. The chamber——one could call it a vast room. There was nothing except lighting, and no more than white walls and floor throughout.

The agency members positioned Tobio and Lavinia in the center of the room and placed the cage containing Jin beside them.

The other agency members remained on standby along the walls, as Himejima Hanezu spoke while confronting the two people and one animal.

“This room is one hundred meters below ground. It’s solid enough to serve as a nuclear bomb shelter. There’s not even the smallest chance of collapse due to impact.”

He then took something like a flat remote control from his breast pocket, and pushed a single button. Thereupon, Jin’s cage was released. The black puppy leapt from inside. The instant Jin was released he ceased his quiet surveillance, and raising a low growl, threatened Himejima Hanezu.

He continued while smiling with his lips.

“That is to say, even if there were some kind of disturbance in here, it wouldn’t particularly affect the research facility up above.”

Himejima Hanezu produced an iron rod from his sleeve. Swinging it horizontally, the part that was stored away extended revealing a shakujou.[26]

"Now then, Ikuse Tobio. For just a bit, why don't you amuse me in here?"

Himejima Hanezu said this while pointing the tip of the shakujou at Tobio.

"——Do set that 'Dog' on me."

Simultaneously the handcuffs restraining his hands released and dropped to the floor. At that moment, overwhelming power spread from Tobio's body——. Releasing Tobio's supernatural ability and Jin's power, he realized their awareness had synchronized.

Just in case, for the sake of confirmation, Tobio glanced around the room. ……There was no cover, so as far as causing the 'Blade from the Shadows' to spring forth, the conditions of this place were poor. As far as that was concerned, it should be sufficient for them to appear from the shadow at his opponent's feet……it seemed he had predicted such a move. However, with the exception of that deadly offensive technique there was nothing else he could do as of the present.

Lavinia drew close, speaking in a whisper.

"……Since it's come to this, I will assist you somehow or another. However, I am guessing from the behavior of the opponent that he desires to investigate Toby's true abilities. But if I were to lend Toby a hand here——"

While speaking, Lavinia glanced over at Sae.

"……Since that might instigate her to become serious, for now I will merely watch attentively."

[26] Also known as a Khakkhara, a staff used in Buddhism. Also called a bishop's staff, it has rings on the end.

Driven by doubt over how she would remove the handcuffs, if it was a magician, he realized that the solution must be that she would use Buddhist magic against the Buddhist magic that was presently been binding her, or so he arbitrarily interpreted it. Rather than this, he was gladdened by her concern for Sae.

Based on what Lavinia said, it appeared an all-out battle against them here would see them fighting against Sae. Considering that the other party's methods were beyond incomprehensible, reckless aggression would lead to a dreadful reality beyond expectations.

Since the handcuffs binding Lavinia had yet to release and drop off, Tobio called out to his partner.

"……Jin."

Simultaneously with his name being called, from the puppy's forehead a katana——a protuberance exactly like a Japanese sword sprouted. During his three days of intensive training, Tobio had named the protuberance that appears from Jin's body 'Blade'[27].

Facing Jin from whose head that blade had grown, Tobio issued his command.

"CHARGE!"

Together with this cry Jin transformed into a high speed bullet and advanced towards Himejima Hanezu. As for the opponent, the shakujou he was holding in his hand gave off a pale light, repelling Jin's attack. That shakujou he was holding took the lethal attack from Jin's blade, did so without breaking, and wasn't jostled either so it clearly was something whose strength had been supernaturally enhanced.

With his body having been freed Jin was able to engage in high speed combat, but the opponent was no ordinary fighter. Regardless of Jin's movement, whether the blows from the forehead blade, launching pursuit with the blades from the back, or even stabbing from a blind

[27] This is the English word

spot using a blade from the tail, all of them were parried by the shakujou.

……As expected, ordinary attacks are of no concern to him. In that case——.

"——HAKEN!"

Hearing Tobio's command Jin's red eyes shone ominously. At that instant, out of the shadows at Himejima Hanezu's feet, a distorted gigantic Blade appeared. ——It was the 'Blade from the Shadows'. From his special training over the past three days, although there was a limit on frequency of usage and a restriction on the point of appearance, it became possible to use this technique to some extent.

He had given it a name for the time being. ——Night Haken. [28]

Regarding this name, Vali who had been observing his special training from nearby,

"It's a valuable skill. Enough that it deserves a name does it not? In that case……a blade that springs from the shadows, the form of a distorted hook……"

For a short while, he pondered it until speaking——.

"——The hook of dark night, Night Haken is what it should be called, you agree?"

And thus it was named. Making an embarrassed face, the troublesome and hard to please youth made this personal suggestion, and it had been accepted. From the beginning, occasionally issuing instructions to Jin verbally was advantageous in some situations, so having something like a name was essential.

He attacked Himejima Hanezu from underfoot with Night Haken, but as though he had completely predicted it he leapt high into the air, and

[28] The Kanji here reads Night Hook. Haken is German for hook.

evaded the extending Blade. While evading, he swung the shakujou horizontally and shattered the blade that had grown from the shadow!

……With the power residing in that shakujou, even smashing Night Haken is easy? For Tobio, this information, as far as his combination with Jin was concerned, was quite severe. That is to say, unless he can reliably stab that guy's body, there's no way to bring him down.

……However, Tobio did not yet possess the complete resolve to kill someone. He had slaughtered Utsusemi monsters. But, even if they possessed supernatural power, he was not prepared to murder an actual person.

Even so Tobio was commanding Jin. For the sake of bringing a swift end to absurd affair. For the sake of rescuing Sae——.

"Jin! Again!"

Once again a blade was born from beneath Himejima Hanezu's feet, but he jumped back and released single strike with the shakujou, easily breaking it. Without giving up he fired off Night Haken over and over, but those were also dodged, all broken without landing a direct hit.

Suddenly, Himejima Hanezu tied a token to one hand, and the shakujou began glowing much brighter.

"HA!"

With that condition, together with his yell he swung the shakujou horizontally. Thereupon, from the shakujou a pale bullet of light flew straight at Tobio. The instant it was about to score a direct hit, from the shadow at Tobio's feet a blade sprung up, and taking the shape of a shield was struck by the bullet of light. This was a defensive technique he'd acquired during his three days of intensive training. The danger with Sacred Gears such as Jin, this was a plan to overcome the case where Tobio who is the master was attacked personally——as a defensive technique, a broad blade would be projected from the shadow at Tobio's feet to serve as a shield.

——But, together with a sharp cracking sound the Night Haken that was a shield was smashed by the bullet of light. The power of the bullet of light, it smashed through the blade without stopping, and Tobio's body was blown away by the resulting shock.

"GAHA!"

His entire body having been equally struck by the force of the blow, Tobio was thrown onto his back on the floor. Due to the aftershock of the light bullet, as well as the damage from being thrown to the floor——pain spread throughout his entire body.

Writhing in pain to the point of being short of breath……he aimlessly rolled along the floor, before he was struck by the follow up attack that was pursuing him. Tobio earnestly tried to resist losing consciousness, and started to rise to his feet.

……Due to the pain from the impact, his entire body wasn't obeying him. His hands had been shaking since before, the trembling in his legs hasn't stopped, however, nevertheless, he directed his gaze at his opponent as he faced Himejima Hanezu.

Regarding his opponent——right as he perceived his glaring eyes, he abruptly smiled.

"……As expected, it's like this huh? This 'Dog', as of yet is hasn't tasted the blood of man has it?"

He continued while pointing the tip of the shakujou at Jin.

"Ikuse Tobio, regarding the sharpness of your——that 'Dog's attack, it is precisely that you lack the resolution. In other words, that attack was docile."

As though seeing through Tobio's emotions, Himejima Hanezu stated this.

"……You who is the master presently carry hesitation towards murdering a human being, correct? That lack of preparedness is

transmitting caution to the black 'Dog' that is your Sacred Gear seemingly causing its attack to become blunt."

…….

He had gained an understanding of their behavior. Indeed, it was as he had said, Tobio——was hesitating with his attacks so as not to kill his human opponent. Regarding this, with the connection of mind and body between them strengthening day by day it was impossible for this to have not been transmitted to Jin.

Presently, it seemed that Himejima Hanezu's skill as a supernatural power user was superior to his own. However, the case of Jin releasing murderous intent towards him from his blade……until now such simple motivation had been lacking. At least in regards to that shakujou, it should normally be capable of slicing it cleanly in two.

With each of them growing stronger day by day, Tobio thought to himself in relief, he had been uneasy. Supposing, if he were unable to control Jin's attack, it would reach a situation where his opponent——a human being would be killed……. It was okay it an Utsusemi monster was his opponent, it was fine if it that clay doll was his opponent, but——. To be able to pull that off against a person, against a being with human form, could he, could Jin, kill them? Would killing them be okay?

——Regarding himself, he merely wanted to rescue Sae and his classmates.

This alone was his determination to fight. For that he seemed ready for any number of Utsusemi opponents. It was the same for his comrades. For this Jin had also steadily attained power. However, if the opponent was a person…….

If he were to become a murderer in the future, Tobio having arrived at this thought——.

'Is it okay if I make Jin a murderer?'

It was at this point——.

Having arrived at this final moment, Ikuse Tobio——ceased to be gentle.

Tobio bit his lip, shedding tears of regret. ……Having arrived at this point, having penetrated his enemy's secret base, even with Sae right before his eyes……until 'that' final moment he had been lacking in resolution.

To the side Lavinia, perceiving Tobio's true intentions, bowed her head.

With a look of pity Himejima Hanezu spoke to Tobio.

"……Now, we must first give you a taste of human blood, or ought it be the ominous Jin instead?"

Letting such words slip from his mouth, Himejima Hanezu approached Tobio. ——It was at that moment.

Immediately following a solemn sound, the door to this space opened a second time.

Passing through it, there was an elderly foreign woman wearing a violet robe. Her appearance suggested that she was in the latter half of her sixties, while the sharp glint in her eye and her upright posture seemed youthful. The figure of an elderly woman——her appearance was like that of a magician as though out of a fantasy tale.

Arriving from behind her was a foreign girl in gothic style attire who seemed to be her attendant. Unlike the elderly woman, she was smiling broadly and her behavior gave off a light atmosphere. However, her clothes were also purple.

The elderly woman spoke.

"Chief engineer-dono, wouldn't you say that you've had enough fun already?"

Himejima Hanezu, lowering the shakujou, spoke while letting out a sigh.

“This witch-dono. For her to arrive here”

The elderly woman, with a smooth stride, quickly strode towards Tobio.

“Since I also wanted to see this. ——The alleged ‘Dog’.”

——she said, turning towards Jin, greatly interested.

……!!!

……Tobio, from the side, abruptly sensed an instant increase in pressure. It was natural. Having attentively watched the fight between himself and Himejima Hanezu——Lavinia was directing previously unseen hostility at the elderly woman who had been called ‘witch’.

……Indeed, ‘witch’. With the appearance of an elderly woman……. In all likelihood, this woman was the one Lavinia was pursuing.

Noticing Lavinia’s stinging look, the elderly woman gazed at her and laughed.

“——Oh my, certainly, this child is the assassin from ‘Grau Zauberer’.”

The elderly woman stood before Lavinia’s eyes, her eyes narrowed, and spoke with a pleased expression.

“It’s been awhile, ‘Ice Princess’ Lavinia.”

Lavinia spoke in annoyance.

“……’Purple Flame’ Augusta, you were the collaborator? I see, it is only natural I would be the one sent after such a ‘Great Magician’ such as you.”

“There are also such remarks that has been made of you. It’s just like that stylish Mephisto. Sending the ‘Ice’ to pursue the ‘Flame’……”

The pair each glared at each other. It could clearly be said that in the atmosphere between the two of them, a pale light was being issued the

seemed to cover their entire bodies. Lavinia's blue light and elderly woman's violet light wound around their respective bodies.

The agency members present——even Himejima Hanezu merely furrowed their eyebrows at their confrontation.

However, the one who destroyed this atmosphere was that person. While slowly revolving on the spot, the one who interrupted the elderly woman and Lavinia was the girl wearing gothic style clothing. The one who had accompanied the elderly woman. That girl, alternatively comparing Lavinia and the elderly woman in amusement, inquired of the elderly woman.

"Oshi-sama, Oshi-sama, who is that child? She's completely adorable *kyun kyun* [29]♪"

The woman let out a sigh of amazement at the girl's speech and conduct.

"……Good grief, you don't read the atmosphere child. This young miss, she's with the aforementioned fair-haired chairman Pheles."

Hearing that, the girl clapped her hands together with delight.

"Wow ♪ That's amazing such a bishoujou-san [30]♪"

The elderly woman announced while turning towards the girl.

"This girl is my disciple. Her name is Walburga."

"Nice to meet you ♪"

The girl who had been introduced as Walburga innocently waved at Lavinia.

Among everyone present there with a troubled response, Lavinia merely hid her face, such was the impact of the tone in which she had spoken.

[29] hi or Oshi is a way of addressing one's teacher or mentor.
[30] Beautiful girl

"……If confirmation with you is possible, then this is already enough."

Steadily, steadily, a cold wave spread throughout the room. Beginning as only a slight chill, the temperature in the room was clearly declining little by little. There was even white breath being exhaled. Everyone was closely observing the source of this drop in atmospheric temperature.

Indeed, from Lavinia's body, a penetratingly cold chill was being released——.

Tobio abruptly recalled that time in the department store. Natsume and Lavinia, over the previous communication had definitely conversed about this.

——If it has become like this, I will just "freeze" them then.

——Th-that's to done as a last resort. This whole place might become frozen over I would think. This! Demise Girl[31]

……Was this what they were talking about?

Cheerfully watching as Lavinia released cold air, the elderly woman—— Augusta enquired of Himejima Hanezu.

"……Chief engineer-dono, I have just one question for you……how many binding techniques did you use on that girl?"

"……We applied spell equations that have been passed down by each of the Five Principal Clans respectively……"

Saying only that much, Himejima Hanezu understandingly groaned.

"……Indeed, was that not enough?"

"Yeah, it was insufficient. Unless it was ten times that amount, it wouldn't bind this young miss."

[31] Kanji:Indiscriminate Ice Princess

A dry metallic sound echoed throughout the vast space——. The handcuffs restraining Lavinia's hands had developed a crack. More cracks appeared after the first, and were spreading——.

"——That is roughly it."

It shattered with fragments scattered all over the floor. Lavinia's blue eyes——were dark, the color having become like that of the ocean depths.

With her wrists now having been freed, Lavinia let out a white breath. And then, from those tiny lips, a curse that did not appear to be of the living world was leaked out.

<<——From eternal sleep, awaken. And thus, the fools shall sleep for eternity——>>

The cold air——congregated. Alongside Lavinia, a vortex of frozen air was being gathered. There, similar to ice, something was taking form. The ice appeared to be made up of hands, feet, a torso, and a head placed on top.

"——This is my honorable puppet."

What was born beside Lavinia, it was a princess made of ice——. About three meters tall, it had the form of a woman wearing a dress. However, those looks were not those of a human. With neither mouth nor nose, the left half had six eyes, while protruding from the right half something similar to a wild rose was growing. It had four arms, all of which were thin. However, in contrast with those thin arms the hands were large.

This is……a Sacred Gear, isn't it? Tobio was unable to judge, but he could at least say that rather than magic, it seemed likely that this was the embodiment of Lavinia's will.

Seeing that strange princess of ice figure, the elderly woman Augusta let of a sigh of admiration.

"……One of the thirteen, Absolute Demise[32]. To think, that someone like this girl would be endowed with the incarnation said to overthrow even God……"

Augusta's gaze turned to Tobio.

"……Could it be said that they attracted each other?"

"It certainly might be possible."

To Lavinia's remark, Augusta let out a laugh while mumbling.

"Interesting. Truly interesting. Azazel and Mephisto already have a hand in this as well."

From behind the old woman who was laughing there abruptly appeared a winding pillar of violet flames. The firepower and heat steadily rising, it became something that rivaled the cold that had been enveloping the room.

<<——The anointed one was fastened to the cursed cross. By the high priest of the purple flames, the sacrifice is enflamed>>

The old woman, just like Lavinia, released her power by reciting a curse.

The purple flames changed for to in the same way as Lavinia's ice phenomenon. A huge crucifix formed for just a moment behind her, and a giant of fresh flames was produced beside the old woman. In the blazing giant's heroic hand was raised a cross made of the same flames. It had a splendid figure, its size seemingly reaching four meters in height.

Lavinia and Augusta were each standing beside what could be called their respective alter egos which were squaring off against each other.

……A princess of ice, a blazing giant shouldering a crucifix, could these be independent avatar types? If they are, not just compared to the Utsusemi that have been attacking until now, their nature is also

[32] Kanji: Eternal Ice Princess

completely difference to our own Sacred Gears. They also seem different compared to the black lion Sae was employing. While those all resembled living creatures, this colossal energy, it seems to be something similar to energy that had been fashioned into human form.

Tobio, gulping, could only attentively watch the humanoids of ice and fire that were before him.

Augusta showed a daring smile.

“My giant made of purple flames or your Ice Princess, to melt, or perhaps to freeze, which shall be the outcome of this match?”

The elderly woman signaled to Himejima Hanezu.

“Chief engineer-dono, don’t you think it would be a good idea if you left this place? As it would seem, this young miss’s objective is me. I cannot bring myself to involve your side with our side’s affairs.”

Augusta pointed upwards with her finger.

“——Isn’t there something up above that you need to take care of?”

Hearing this one line, Himejima Hanezu looked over at the agency members. Considering their feelings he quickly unsealed the doorway, and let them out of the room.

Himejima Hanezu, who was also accompanied by Sae, said one thing to the elderly woman.

“……I will moderately rely on you.”

Doing as he was told, he left that place.

——He was taking Sae.

Tobio, his body heavily damaged, in spite of his shaking knees, somehow was able to stand up. Linking up with Jin, he once again observed Lavinia and Augusta.

Lavinia and Augusta, each accompanied by the princess of ice and the giant of flames respectively, were drawing trails of light in the air that repeatedly formed magic squares, from which supernatural fireballs were being released alongside lighting strikes! It would seem that this was what was known as 'Magic'.

During his three days of intensive training, Tobio had been informed about magic from Lavinia; magic had been achieved by great technique users from ancient times; whether miracles brought forth by 'Gods', demonic power of 'Devils, or else original theories on supernatural phenomenon, they were all things that could be reproduced through formulas. All phenomenon have fixed laws, which can be measured, calculated, and their manifestation derived through 'magic'. That magic square, it was something that could solve the calculations for the sake of releasing unusual power. They were each using their own formulas to reproduce supernatural phenomenon.

Fire, wind, water, ice, lightning……with every type of phenomenon being fired from the magic circles of those two, one person, a young girl was cheerfully watching——Walburga.

"Wow ~Sanshi, you're in high spirits! Well then, should I observe this as well?"

She then took a broom out of a magic square, floated in the air at a low elevation, and lounged there.

The princess of ice, swinging her arms horizontally, caused pillars of ice to successively appear from the floor. The blazing giant, heartily swinging the crucifix in a seeping motion, completely mowed down those pillars of ice.

While their magician companions were having a magical battle on the side, the ice princess and the blazing giant were engaged in a severe fight.

With the supernatural phenomenon being performed by the pair of magicians had already surpassed Tobio's imagination, in regard to what

manner ought he to attack, he had completely tired of such thoughts. Speaking honestly, it was clear that charging in carelessly would have him either turned into an ice sculpture, or reduced to cinders.

Lavinia said as much to Tobio.

“Toby, leave this place to me and go help that girl. From the start, finding and destroying those witches was my duty. After finding them here, I must return to my original task.”

“B-but!”

Lavinia smiled sweetly.

“I feel like doing a favor in consideration for the kind-hearted Toby who would not raise a hand against a human being. However, a day will certainly come when, to protect someone important to you, you will be confronted with a scene where you cannot help but to wound someone else. ……When it comes to rescuing her, surely it is that sort of situation, right?”

Lavinia pointed towards the gate.

“Hurry up, you need to go.”

Remaining in this place under Lavinia’s protection……this was clearly not the most effective choice. Since that witch Augusta could also use magic, and since it would mean being near that blazing giant, it was just too powerful, to the point that the situation exceeded reality. For the current Tobio and Jin they cannot possibly face this opponent. To face that old woman as an opponent, it would appear to take something on the level of Lavinia. That was how it was——.

Tobio made a bitter decision. Together with Jin he dashed for the door.

“……Sorry, Lavinia-san!”

While leaving a deep felt apology, Tobio decided to pursue Himejima Hanezu and Sae. This was the one thing that he himself was presently able to do. This was the most important reason he had come here.

Smiling sweetly, Lavinia resumed the fight. Neither Augusta nor the girl called Walburga chased after Tobio. Since she was gazing at Lavinia in a daze he was lucky that she likely didn't notice him.

His destination——this facilities upper levels.

——From here, I will unconditionally rescue Sae.

Possessing unshakable will, Tobio advanced together with Jin.

Part 2

Natsume and Samejima, having escaped from Toujou Sae's house, and after defeating several Utsusemi, managed to escape from the residential area and arrived at the site of a discontinued factory.

Having hidden themselves under the cover of the factory's interior, Natsume, for the sake of confirmation, tried calling Tobio by telephone. However, what entered her ear was only a message saying, "Out of signal area~". The communication use magic that had been placed in their ears had died out before anyone had noticed. Either the distance between them and Lavinia was too great, or else——.

Perhaps, those two have been taken somewhere using some kind of transference technique of the enemy was what Natsume conjectured. In the case of Tobio, whose power had been growing up until now, and Lavinia, in the case that she released her full power without considering the circumstances of her surroundings, even including the multitude of Utsusemi swarming over the place, they should be able to cause serious injury even to the enemy leaders. When Natsume and Samejima met Lavinia they immediately witnessed her power——'Ice Princess', which could be called nothing other than a masterpiece.

However, that power was so far beyond excessive, forget indoors, to make use of it downtown wouldn't be simple. This is because it would be almost certain to involve numerous other people.

Be that as it may, as for whether or not that power was manifested at Sae's house……it would not have been utilized. Because they had been Tobio's neighbors. Without a doubt, using that power there, not just the opponent, Tobio and Toujou Sae would have been dragged in as well.

Being unable to get in contact with those two, Natsume immediately shook her head. Seeing that Samejima struck the earth with his fist in vexation.

"……Not only was it a trap, but for some of us to break through it while the rest are caught, what kind of mess is this? My own naivety makes me want to puke."

Samejima, who had been raising his own power in order to overcome the defeat he suffered at the department store, had headed to Toujou Sae's house this time filled with confidence. But now, with the members separated after the enemy tripped them up so easily——.

However, the same was true of Natsume. Tobio, Samejima who had grown, Lavinia, and Vali were all companions, people who had been providing her with unshakable confidence. In this last investigation, it had been her expectation to have obtained some useful information regarding the enemy attack.

That——had been shattered.

……Nevertheless, Samejima was the kind of person capable of self-reflection and was able to see the bright side of the situation. Returning to his wild appearance, in fact, Samejima was reflecting upon himself. He had also been able to get along with the younger Vali without incident. Bearing this in mind, Samejima's generosity was vast when compared to other delinquents his age.

"……Either way, once again, we have to decide, whether to go back to that house or to return to the condominium……"

Natsume was thinking over their next course of action.

Sounds were heard from outside the factory. The pair's nerves were set on edge, devoting themselves to concealing their presence as much as possible.

For a brief moment, they patiently observed……then a single small figure appeared in the entrance to the factory. It was a young girl of about nine or ten with her hair in braids. Having no memory of her Natsume peered at her suspiciously. This factory……that a girl would come to such a place during the day?

In the midst of this suspicious atmosphere, Samejima alone showed an expression of surprise. Samejima stood up, and slowly approached the girl.

"……It can't be."

Standing before the girl Samejima dropped his vigilance and asked.

"You, why are you here?"

Was she an acquaintance? As Natsume reluctantly revealed herself, she formally inquired of Samejima.

"……Who?"

"It's Nobu——Maeda's little sister."[33]

Maeda Nobushige——Samejima's close friend. He was the important friend that he desired to rescue. His little sister……she was the girl standing there?

"But, why would you——"

Then, as Samejima was asking that——a blade was thrust into his abdomen! With a particularly think sound, the blade passed all the way

[33] Just to clarify, Nobu is Maeda's nickname, not his sister's name. It's confusing because Nobu can also be a girls name.

through his back. ……From the girl's hand, there was a distorted blade. Just like, those tentacles carried by the Utsusemi——.

"……!!!"

From the mouth of Samejima who'd been pierced through the abdomen, a large amount blood was vomited out with a gurgling sound.

"SAMEJIMA-KUN!"

Rushing over, Natsume looked at Samejima's affliction——she perceived that the heart was intact despite the wound. It was a situation where it could not be said that the wound would certainly prove fatal.

Furthermore the figure of someone appeared within the factory——. It was a single young man. Seeing him, Samejima's eyes widened.

"……Nobu……"

While losing blood, Samejima called out the name of his friend. Indeed, that young man——was Maeda Nobushige. His eyes were hollow, indicating that he was as yet under the influence of brainwashing.

"Kukuku……"

The laugh of a third party echoed through the factory. The new appearance——was a man in the latter half of his twenties wearing a business suit. The man spoke while wearing a gaudy smile.

"Yo, it's been a couple of days. Samejima Kouki of the 'Four Fiends'. It's nice to meet you as well, Minagawa Natsume."

Natsume had no memory of him, but upon seeing him, despite the fatal wound, Samejima's face instantly distorted with fury.

"……Doumon."

This man was Doumon Kazuhisa of the 'Utsusemi Agency'…….

Seeing Samejima's present condition, Doumon's smiled all the more broadly. He spoke cheerfully.

"Why? For what reason? To be making that kind of face. Why, that Maeda Nobushige should be together with a monster imitating his sister? The reason is simple. ——That girl, she's an Utsusemi that's taken on the form of Maeda Nobushige's younger sister."

Positioned beside Maeda Nobushige, there was the girl who appeared to be his younger sister. She was……an Utsusemi!?

"An Utsusemi……with the form of Maeda-kun's imouto-san?[34] Such a thing is possible!?"

Natsume raised an astonished voice. It was a natural response. Up until now, they had only ever been attacked by variations of existing plants and animals. What had been brought here, unexpectedly, was an Utsusemi that reached the point of possessing a form identical to that of a person, something that was beyond their imaginations.

Seeing Natsume and Samejima's reactions, Doumon laughed with delight.

"Fufufu, did you believe that such a technique for making monsters that imitate living things was nonexistent? Such ideas would be conceived by ants. ——This is my hobby."

"……Fiend"

Feeling displeasure from the depths of her heart, Natsume spat out as much. That which Doumon had undertaken, it was an abhorrent idea. Something like creating Utsusemi imitations of the relatives of their classmates, that was a far too excessive deviation from ethical behavior. No, for such a thing, there was no point at this late hour of doubting whether the people responsible for this event were capable of it.

Doumon snorted through his nose with a *fun*.

[34] Imouto=younger sister. The original Japanese sounded better.

"Well, I won't deny that. ——Now, with that wound it won't be long for Samejima Kouki. The remains, that corpse cannot be left alone. The demon kept within that Sacred Gear, if the owner dies, it will disappear automatically until it is reborn inside of a new host. That's what our comrade the 'Black Angel' who grappled with the creator of that system was saying. So, if at all possible we must forcibly drag out the Sacred Gear dwelling within his body."

……In actuality, their vulgarity knew no bounds. They were nothing more than accessories to the Sacred Gears to them. To the end they were not interested in anything aside from the power possessed by Natsume and Samejima. If it was for the sake of acquiring that, whatever the sacrifice, whatever the means, they would do it without batting an eyelid. For them who desired revenge upon the Clans, their eyes and spirit being clouded by it, they had crossed over the final line for which they could still be considered human.

"……I won't let you."

Natsume stood in the way becoming a shield for Samejima who was lying on the ground.

……Looking over, Samejima's cat——Byakusa, was extending its tail to touch its master's abdomen. Touched by the tail, it proceeded to cover the affected area that had been damaged. ……This, while it was uncertain if it medical treatment or such, it was certain that the independent avatar type was operating in some manner or other on its master. It was unknown what kind of outcome would be produced, but even if it was an unskilled operation, being bound to him it was entirely incapable of fleeing, so the white cat had no choice but to cling to him. In that case, what Natsume was currently capable of——was to avert Doumon's attention until Byakusa's action could be completed.

Seeing Natsume's action, Doumon sighed.

"Either you are ignorant, or you're just reckless……. I don't hate things like that though."

From his pocket, Doumon produced several talismans, which he released into the air as he spoke words of power. Thereupon, the talismans moved autonomously and formed the shape of a pentagram. Swelling from the earth's surface, a shape was formed.

Before Natsume's eyes five clay dolls appeared. Doumon was standing beside the clay dolls, smiling fearlessly.

"……Given that I have a fondness for completely demolishing such brave dispositions."

Doumon swung his hand horizontally, and with that the two front most clay dolls rushed forwards.

"Do it, GRIFFON!"

Receiving Natsume's instruction, the falcon flying about the factory's ceiling at high speed, flew at one of the clay dolls.

However, with that attack, the best it was able to do was to shave a small portion off the tenacious clay doll, failing to destroy its gigantic body.

Doumon sneered upon seeing that outcome.

"Weak! Something of that degree, my doll won't crumble from that!"

Nevertheless Natsume sent instructions to Griffon with her hand. Without saying a word, Natsume had mastered the ability to issue orders to her partner with hand gestures. This wordless approach, it was for the sake of her tactics not being read. Otherwise, it also has the guarantee of working in situations where one cannot speak.

After the falcon displayed numerous feinting maneuvers in the air, it swooped down all at once. After putting on speed, and changing the sturdiness of both wings, it managed to cut through the shoulder of the opponent's arm.

A direct hit——just as that happened, the clay doll let loose with the arm other than the one that had been targeted and severed! From the all too sudden blow, Griffon was sent flying off to the side after taking the blow from the arm! Griffon, having been blown off into the factory's interior, plunged into a pile of abandoned scrap material.

"GRIFFON!"

Natsume raised a shriek! The clay doll picked up the falcon from the pile of scrap material. Griffon——had become completely limp, causing her to realize how powerful that surprise hit had been.

Seeing the falcon caught in the hand of the clay doll, Doumon raised a loud guffaw.

"Heera, it was caught. In that condition——"

The guy gestured with his finger. Acting in concert the clay doll put force into its hand; the hand holding the falcon…….

- Gushari*

Together with Doumon's words, from the factory interior the echo of a thick sound was heard. From the clay doll's hand, a large quantity of red blood was gushing out and dripping onto the floor.

Seeing that spectacle, Natsume's whole body trembled.

"GRIFOoooooOON!!!"

At Natsume's screaming voice Doumon, whose facial expression was like of someone who'd reached the peak of excitement, laughed.

"FUHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! Both the Sacred Gear you rely upon and the boy who is your partner are in tatters. Come come, what are you going to do next, huh!? Are you going to fight me with your own body!? Whether it's you or him over there! Isn't it the case that without the Sacred Gears you're just ordinary humans?!"

The clay dolls were steadily closing the distance. Having lost the falcon that was her partner, for Natsume frustration, sorrow, fury, all mixed together inside her while her tears flowed, as she continued to stand there guarding her companion Samejima.

"……Es……cape……"

Samejima was letting out such a fleeting voice, but she could not proceed as advised. Natsume had decided. To achieve victory for them all——. For all of them, in order to continue living, her mind chose to demolish the present state of affairs. Therefore, Samejima cannot be abandoned. Nor Tobio, nor Lavinia, not even Griffon……not one of them could be abandoned! For everyone who had survived, to aid all of their classmates, to achieve a resolution where they could all be smiling, these were her truest feelings, and this was also what she alone had decided.

……To succumb to this. Or to be killed by this……!!

Even if she was the alone, this was not her destiny……!! Her own close friend, as well as her classmates, she would finish rescuing all of them from this absurd situation!

"……I shall not be defeated by the likes of you guys!! Since we, without a single one of us perishing, will safely recover all of our fellow classmates!! I'll defeat you no matter what incomprehensible reason you guys have for forming such a group————!!"

Her tears still falling, Natsume let out a scream from the heart. At that moment, from within herself, a single loud "dokun" sound was produced——.

The pleasantly smiling Doumon——his expression completely changed. Looking over behind Natsume, his eyes widened in astonishment.

Prompted by that gaze, Natsume gave a fleeting glance behind her. Thereupon——there, an electrical phenomenon being released from its whole body——there was the white cat releasing sparks. While releasing a *BACHI*, *BACHI*, sound, electricity was running throughout the

body of Byakusa. Moreover, as though acting in concert, the chest of Samejima who was laying down was throbbing grandly enough that that a *dokun* *dokun* sound could be heard.

"……Byakusa-chan?"

Natsume was showing a quizzical look, but yet another mysterious phenomenon occurred. A strong wind began rolling throughout the inside of the factory. This gradually strengthened, forming a whirlwind enveloping the body of one of the clay dolls. Indeed, surrounding the clay doll that had crushed Griffon, a powerful wind was born.

"……Griffon?"

In front of Natsume who had asked this question, something happened!

From Byakusa and from Griffon, who was in the hand of the clay doll, an intense brilliance was released, immediately bursting! Natsume had covered her eyes from the excessively intense light, and after the light ceased the appearance of the **things** that she saw left her at a loss for words.

Standing in front of Samejima, there was a huge white beast——. By the clay doll, half of which's body had been blown away, a four-legged monster was floating in the air——.

Regarding the white beast, in spite having the form of a cat the size it was at least three meters in size, possessing protruding tusks like those of a sabre tooth tiger. Moreover, it had numerous long tails growing from it, all of which included a sharp tip in the shape of a round cone. The whole body was emitting sparks.

As for the huge four-legged beast floating in the air, its size exceeded two meters. There were two pairs of wings on its back, and its head that resembled that of a falconhad horns on it. However, the form of a beast had been matched up with that of a bird, just like the griffon that appears in fantasy productions——the upper half of the body was that of a falcon, and the lower half of the body was that of a monstrous lion. Its whole body was clad in wind.

Byakusa and Griffon transformed into these……? Other than this, no other phenomenon was likely.

Seeing this condition, Doumon became extremely flustered.

"……What, this is……!! These are……the 'Four Fiends'!? Their original forms!?"

A wind cut through and a *HYU* sound was heard. Passing by Natsume and Samejima, something small moved about at high speeds. Looking about, it was the numerous tails of the white beast, which were continuously moving about the factory's interior freely, finally swooping down upon a clay doll! The clay doll took a guard stance by crossing both arms, which was easily broken through, as throughout the whole body the white tails——the lances pierced through it! Instantly, releasing a seemingly huge electrical phenomenon, the clay doll was fried from the inside! Its entire body smoking, the clay doll collapsed worn out and powerless.

Seeing that sequence of moves, Doumon shrieked.

"——Toukotsu! Truly, this is Samejima Kouki's……!!"

Before he could finish speaking, a sudden gust enveloped the inside of the factory! The large winged animal, was flapping its two pairs of wings on the spot! The pile of scrap material was lifted up, and even the factory roof was blown off by its vigor. Other than Natsume anything that was not tied down was also launched up into the sky. As for Samejima, one of the white beast's tails was wrapped around him fastening him down.

The instant Natsume confirmed Samejima's safety, a countless number of sharp wave-like things attacked a clay doll. In no more than a second, the clay doll's entire body was covered with multiple scars as though it had been slashed. Shortly thereafter, the clay doll crumbled into fragments all over the floor.

"This is Kyuuki!!? How unpleasant! That it would even be both at the same time——"

Seeing the body of the transformed Griffon, Doumon was uttering as much, only to then raise a shriek as he became aware of the change in himself.

“GUAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!! M-my arm is GAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

Indeed, from below the elbow, his left arm was gone. Regarding that arm, it had fallen to the ground nearby. In all likelihood, it had been hit by the wind blades Griffon had just released. Because of that, the arm had been cut off.

Doumon crouched down on the spot, writhing in shock due to the pain of losing his arm.

“……These are Griffon and Byakusa-chan’s true forms……?”

Natsume was nothing but astonished at the transformations of her own falcon and Byakusa. Truly, that this falcon and cat, that they would become such large animals……. To borrow Doumon’s words, it was possible that these were the original forms of the ‘Four Fiends’. Simultaneous with them desiring this, they had sensed that as well. They were in a completely different dimension compared to the Utsusemi. Considering that even those clay dolls produced by Doumon——a special ability user, were massacred so easily, that demonstrated how powerful they were.

The transformed Griffon descended downwards towards Natsume’s position. Griffon, who since before had behaved like a spoiled child drew close to Natsume. Seeing that, “Ahh, this child truly is Griffon,” Natsume said with relief. Even if the form had changed, the mind was the same. Naturally, she was able to turn and accept this new appearance.

Surely, Byakusa and Griffon, due to the predicament of their masters, or possibly due to resonating with their complex feeling, had seemingly increased their power in an instant.

“What’s this, you’re still alive? It would have been settled without Azazel getting mad at me.”

Suddenly the voice of a familiar young boy reverberated within the factory. Looking in that direction——a silver haired youth was standing there.

“VALI!?”

Natsume spoke the youth’s name. The silver haired youth in a muffler and short pants. He, after arriving, waved and spoke to Natsume.

“Yo, Minagawa Natsume. I was late. Given that there were tasks to finish. I’ve come to meet up with you.”

In spite of seeing the circumstances within the factory he was relatively cool, as though he had previous experience with carnage of this level. To have had such experience at his age had an eerie significance……she was grateful for his help as of present. Whether with regards to the wounded Samejima who could not be roused, or because they ought to look into the well-being of Tobio and Lavinia.

——Vali then looked over at Doumon. Doumon was picking up his fallen arm, and then began running towards the entrance. He was planning to escape. Sensing that, Vali stood in his way.

“MOVE! YOU DAMN BRAT!”

Doumon verbally abused the youth. Vali twitched an eyebrow.

“……Move? About that——“

The next moment——glowing wings sprouted from Vali’s back. They were wings of splendid light——. From those light wings, there was an unknown pressure that was seemingly being released, overwhelming every being present. Even for Natsume and the transformed Griffon and Byakusa, it was certain that they as of the present would fall before this. This small built youth, apparently he was an enormous monster.

Even Doumon's whole body was shaking when confronted by the excessive pressure the youth was releasing, to the point he dropped the amputated arm he was carrying.

"Are you talking to me? A lowly human special ability user like you."

While smiling fearlessly, Vali held out a hand——it was at that moment.

"……Wait"

It was Samejima's voice. Turning towards it, his affliction wrapped in Byakusa's tail as an emergency treatment, Samejima had stood up. Due to the amount of blood he had lost, he shouldn't be moving. However, eagerly standing despite the intense trembling in his knees, the delinquent took first one step, then another, as he slowly approached Doumon one step at a time.

"……That guy, he's mine to beat up."

Samejima, looking over at Maeda Nobushige who had lost consciousness during the recent battle, clenched his fist after letting out a single breath.

The aforementioned Doumon who was trembling all over from Vali's pressure, had dropped to the floor unable to move from the spot. Samejima seized Doumon by the nape of his neck and forced him to his feet.

"Hiiiiiiii!! Forgive me pleeeeAaaase!!"

Doumon gave an unsightly scream. Samjima, his face distorted with rage, without stopping——punched him with his clenched fist! Doumon was knocked back hard by that, falling prostrate upon the ground. After releasing that single blow, looking over towards Maeda, Samejima let out a few words.

"……Nobu, for the moment, I'll let him off with this one blow."

Saying no more than that, Samejima lost consciousness and collapsed. Vali caught him skillfully.

Held within the small built youth's arms Samejima was smiling contently despite suffering from a mortal wound. Seeing Samejima like that Vali laughed pleasantly.

"Heh, he revived to such an extent. How amusing."

"Vali. Samejima-kun is……?"

Natsume enquired of Samejima's condition. Vali examined Samejima's wound, and said.

"The independent avatar type Sacred Gear, it seems it applied lifesaving treatment for the sake of protecting its master. The bleeding has stopped. Well, that's not to say the lost blood won't need to be replenished……"

"……The bleeding has stopped? Even though there's an open wound in his chest?"

"Yeah, look at his back. The white cat's tail has plugged it. The 'Four Fiend' is mending the body of its master."

Just as Vali had said, the fatal wound that reached from his front to his back had been plugged by Byakusa's tail. Indeed, the tail had dissolved and been assimilated into Samejima.

Vali continued speaking.

"Originally, the Sacred Gear was something generated by the body. Thus it's not surprising that the body of the independent avatar type is compatible with the master.

……The abilities of these children, they were capable of such things……?

Regarding the ability she herself had acquired——Natsume was once again amazed at the yet unknown variations of it.

While supporting Samejima, Vali generated a magic square at his feet. This skillful silver-haired youth had even learned to use magic.

“I am now opening a transference magic square, which will transfer Samejima to the Grigori research institute. If it’s there, I expect he can be saved from this wound.”

Vali was promptly dealing with the aftermath. Indeed, this child was unexpectedly kind.

Samejima and Byakusa who’d transformed into a large beast, followed by the captured Doumon Kazuhisa, were transferred to the institute of the ‘Governor General’s’ organization by Vali. Presumably, the latest classmate transformed into an Utsusemi——Maeda Nobushige, by means of the magic square, had vanished without a trace.

However, the young girl-type Utsusemi he had been employing, after seemingly losing its power it dissolved into syrup. For the sake of investigating this mass of syrup, Vali had filled a small vial with it and transferred it through the magic square.

——Then, Vali spoke to Natsume about the present state of affairs. Upon hearing that Natsume was very much astonished.

“……The Five Principal Clans are moving!?”

Vali nodded to Natsume’s words.

“Yeah, everything regarding the location chosen for the Utsusemi Agency’s hidden facility was leaked to their side. It seems a large number purge agents will be heading there sooner or later.”

“Then, Vali the task you received from the ‘Governor General’, was that to inform the Five Principal Clans of the believed location of their hideout?”

The youth nodded in response to Natsume’s inquiry.

"……Azazel is always like that. He uses me for nothing more than an errand brat. Really, doesn't he consider how valuable an existence I am……"

Vali slouched while grumbling.

……In that case, while they had been heading to Toujou Sae's house, Vali had gone and forfeited information about the location that was the foundation of the main culprits.

When that happens, wouldn't even the Utsusemi Agency become peacefully apologetic? Such might be expected, but with the Five Principal Clans who had been cleaning up after the Utsusemi Agency up until now being aware of the location of their hidden facility, it wouldn't come as a surprise if they entered and attacked them immediately.

……However, what was incomprehensible, why was this information from the Governor General not passed on to them themselves instead? Additionally, why leak this information to the Five Principal Families at this time? ……With so many incomprehensible aspects, perhaps, the Governor General was testing them? Perhaps thinking it would serve to break the present deadlock, could he have daringly appraised Natsume and company——the power of the Four Fiends and Ikuse Tobio? Or else could he have mobilized them so that the Utsusemi Agency and the turncoat in his organization would be moved to observe them……? Or perhaps it was all of that——?

Vali enquired of Natsume who was thinking.

"Now, I was thinking of heading towards the situation; you as well Minagawa Natsume?"

"……Where to?"

To Natsume's inquiry the silver-haired youth spoke with complete joy.

"——That 'Dog's' location. It appears that they were taken to the hideout of the Utsusemi Agency. We will retrieve them before the agents

from the Five Principal Families had a chance to reach their stronghold. That's my new mission. ——Are you coming?"

It was the best invitation one could ask for.

——I will proceed to Ikuse-kun and Lavinia's location! And then, I will put an end to the Utsusemi Agency!

Natsume, nodding her head, accompanied Vali together with the transformed Griffon.

Chapter 7 -God <<Slaying>> Incarnation of Destruction/Canis Lykaon[35]

Part 1

Having slipped out of the underground hall, Tobio dashed directly to the elevator together with Jin. Waiting for him there were his fellow classmates who'd been turned into Utsusemi. It was as if they were stationed there awaiting anyone who fled from the hall. Two men in business suits could be seen commanding them from the rear. They each had tied tokens to their hands. Agency members.

"MOVE IT——!"

Tobio charged while screaming. Jin was rapidly bisecting the Utsusemi monsters that his fellow students were employing with Night Haken. An enormous plant Utsusemi with the appearance of a rose, an insectoid Utsusemi resembling a stag beetle, in an instant they'd been cleared away by thorny blades appearing from the shadows at their feet——by Haken.

Suddenly, he saw that Haken had also pierced a wall. Looking over, there was a Utsusemi with a form resembling a chameleon that was mimicking a wall. It had clung to the wall, seemingly to conceal its figure, but its abdomen had been pierced by Haken. It was already dead,

[35] Kanji:Dog God of the Black Blade

falling as it was to the floor of the corridor. ……It seemed Jin had immediately perceived something that Tobio himself was not able to see and followed up with an attack . Such bestial senses to detect presences, this was something Tobio did not possess.

……No, it's not just that. It's evident that Jin's ambiance had completely changed since coming here. Jin's small body was generating shadows that were spreading, completely dying a portion of the corridor black. The floor, the walls, the ceiling, they were all swallowed by shadows incomparable to that of the puppy's physique. From that black shadow, countless blades had sprouted. With every step that Jin took, the shadow advanced as it spread along the corridor.

Seeing this the agency members' eyes widened, and their entire bodies were trembling. They dropped the magical talismans in their hands due to the extent of fear they felt towards the tiny dog.

"KU!"

Shaking off his fear, one of the agency members once again produced talismans from his breast pocket. However, a single Haken sword appeared from the shadows on the walls, precisely piercing through the talisman he had produced.

Since the talismans were now useless, with the bound token still being okay the agency member switched to the hand type——but a Haken appeared from his feet and instantly reached his throat.

At this moment of aggression Tobio was at a loss for words. Jin……had already understood it. The talismans they possess, the hand tokens, he was already aware that these were articles used to bring about supernatural phenomenon. As a result, he utilized a technique to destroy them first. The talismans, the hand tokens, his opponent's fighting spirit——.

He hadn't taken lives the way an Utsusemi monster would, since it was apparent that Tobio his master was against murder. Having guessed as

much about his master's true feelings this puppy had been influenced by him.

It was not only Tobio, the agency member duo understood as well, having lowered their hostility, and dropped what they were wielding.

While looking over at Jin, the agency members whispered to each other.

"……It seems its power was raised through instinctual resonance. Seeing that battle between ice and flame……"

"……Within the thirteen varieties, several of them have been gathered here. Merely one variety can be said to distort events, but with this many……"

Tobio, without giving any thought to their murmuring, spoke vigorously as he took one step towards them.

"That elevator was a type requiring authorization. ——Would you be so kind as to escort me up."

For them whose fighting spirit had been diminished, they no longer had the power deny Tobio's request.

From the elevator, waiting for Tobio and Jin who had ridden it up—— was a multitude of his fellow classmates. Utsusemi monsters were deployed nearby, which rushed at Tobio and Jin as soon as they passed through the door.

"SLAAASH!"

Receiving his master's order, Jin turned into a black bullet and plunged into the group of Utsusemi. Simultaneously distorted blades sprouted up throughout the passageway. The points of those blades accurately struck the cores of the Utsusemi monsters, and from that single blow, they all collapsed.

Seemingly overwhelming, with just that amount of violence, in a flash Jin closed in on the monsters without interference, and blew straight through them.

“JIN!”

Tobio, shaking off the outstretched hands of his fellow classmates, was thrust away from Jin who up ahead having been caught. Unable to follow his this puppy’s master could do nothing but call his name. For Tobio himself as well, the passage being blocked by his classmates, it had developed into scuffling and grappling. However, as Jin struck down the Utsusemi monsters, they would lose consciousness and fall to the ground, so it didn’t become a serious situation.

In this manner, there was no need to worry about them suffering fatal injuries, since in this approach they wouldn’t even receive injuries. Using the minimum amount of self-defense to escape danger, Tobio’s body suffered bruising all over. In spite of getting hit and kicked, he limited the amount of times he retaliated against his fellow students. Because of the brawl, the uniform he was wearing was in tatters, and he was gasping for breath.

Yet nevertheless, he faced each of his classmates who had been turned into Utsusemi. As for Tobio, he was depending on Jin’s nose. Regarding Jin, he had started to follow Sae’s scent that lingered in the corridor. Tobio, in pursuit of his figure, gave chase immediately.

Within the passage ahead of them, all lighting was suddenly plunged into darkness. The moment he thought it might be an enemy trap, the emergency lights immediately came on. And then, an flurried alert sound reverberated throughout the entirety of the building’s interior.

‘Emergency alert announcement. Emergency alert announcement. From outside, a hostile organization is approaching. They appear to be agents from the Five Principal Clans. Repeat. From outside, a hostile organization is approaching. They appear to be agents from the Five Principal Clans. All members, evacuate your post, and following the emergency manual——‘

The red lights installed throughout the hallway were fervently flashing.

……Emergency alert announcement? The Five Principal Clans were approaching from the outside? This location, it must have been leaked to the Five Principal Clans. For all the Clans who seek to keep the 'Four Fiends Project' under wraps, with members of the Five Principal Clans going as far as to ensure that the media would not be alerted to the 'Utsusemi Agency', it's certainly possible to say they would attack this base once they discovered it.

……Assuming that's the case, there's no time. Sae hasn't been rescued yet……. However, Tobio was struck by such anxious thoughts.

No, wait……. The Five Principal Clans, in regards to his fellow students and their families who'd been confirmed to be in this base, what exactly was it they were planning to do with them? Would they be safely sent home? Such a thing was not within expectations. He had heard that they correct deficiencies in their families. In that case, his classmates and their relatives——.

Suddenly Tobio looked back. Behind him, his fellow students who had come rushing at him were collapsed throughout the passageway. Having lost their Utsusemi monsters, they had lost consciousness and immediately collapsed. There was no transference by means of a magic square occurring. That may be natural. Since they had been previously transported here, there was no need to move them this time.

Seeing his fellow students collapsed on the floor, Tobio wore a bitter expression.

……As far as rescuing those who are here, will I not have a second chance to save them? Perhaps, regarding those guys from the agency, if they were to be defeated by this raid against them, it seems they would abandon this base in order to escape in one piece. In that case they…….

There wasn't enough time for Tobio alone to carry all these people out. It was also necessary to disconnect all of their relatives from that equipment. In that case, what about Lavinia? If it was her magic——. No

good. She was taking part in a life or death struggle with a powerful witch down below. Even if for arguments sake he had succeeded in rescuing them right now there was no way for Tobio, who was lacking in comprehension of supernatural powers, to move them all.

Well then, as the only one who could save them, who could he save……? Could he only save Sae and her relatives……?

Having thought of this Tobio banged his head against the wall.

——That's the worst idea.

……Regarding myself, I had already made up my mind. Not just Sae, I would save everyone. Sasaki, Minagawa Natsume's friend, Samejima Kouki's friend, everyone——.

……I won't give up……!! That I could just yield to such absurdity and leave them like this, of course I can't do that……!! I'll save everyone! I will save everyone!

……Well then, how do I……?

Not coming to an answer was torturous for Tobio. Certainly while debating this Sae was steadily getting further away. There wasn't time to think about this. He couldn't spare the time to come up with an answer.

Wearing an expression of anguish, Tobio raised his voice.

"——These 'human beings' are beyond comprehension. To think they can use a human being in an experiment as though they were the same as trash, and that it would appear to be an act of divine mercy to try and save them all. Undeniably, they are beings beyond salvation."

As he cried out as such mingled with grief, a man with long wavy black hair appeared. He was a foreigner wearing something similar to a robe. After glancing at Tobio and——Jin, the man spoke.

"……I'm someone from the 'Governor General's' Organization. Intruding to help you guys was unexpectedly easy."

……The 'Governor General's' Organization. If that's the case, he's a Grigori official? Unsure if what he said was accurate, Jin was increasingly vigilant given the apparent pressure that the man was giving off.

The man spoke while flipping his robe. He pointed down the passageway with his index finger.

"'Dog', up ahead, the man who is seeking his own death, he is waiting for you. Go. You can entrust the matter of transporting of all the people here to me. Since that is the task I have been entrusted with. Originally, it was just to confirm the presence of the aforementioned witch but……"

The man dropped his gaze. It was as though he was aware of the battle involving his magician comrade that was happening down in the basement. The man let out a sigh and spoke again.

"Look, it's as I said. Go quickly now."

The man turned his finger towards the collapsed fellow students. Thereupon, a magic square expanded underneath them, and following the glow their figures vanished. It appeared they had been transported.

Tobio timidly enquired.

"……What's your name?"

The man replied while seemingly uninterested.

"……Cadre of the Grigori, Kokabiel."

Confirming that, Tobio bowed saying, "I'm relying on you," and left immediately. Already, he apparently could do nothing under the present circumstances other than rely upon this suspicious man.

As he ran Tobio heard,

"……I should have said already that I have no interest in Sacred Gears, Azazel"

The man——Kokabiel's voice could be heard letting out such words.

Part 2

Again advancing through the passageway the place Tobio and Jin arrived at——was an upstairs room with a wide view. Most of the walls were made of glass, providing an unhindered look at the outside. Looking around, a green landscape could be seen below——. All kinds of trees could be seen filling the entire area. It was clear that this place was somewhere in the mountains.

"Isn't the scenery great? It's the only place in this base I find to be pleasing."

A sudden voice. Looking over in that direction, there was the figure of Himejima Hanezu. Next to him, Sae was stationed there accompanied by an enormous black lion.

Himejima Hanezu spoke while gazing outside.

"We spent many years establishing this hidden base within this remote mountain. Here is the only place. This outlook room was made using one part of the mountain. Since it's surrounded by a barrier, it's not visible from the outside. Therefore, without being seen by anyone, you can have an unbroken view of the landscape. Isn't it beautiful?"

Himejima Hanezu wore a smile on his lips as he uttered this. As expected, this place——their base had been built inside of a mountain. It was clear from just a sweep over the exterior that, in regards to the mountain's vicinity, it could be reliably determined that it was a long distance between them and the nearest town.

He let out a single sigh, and after shaking his head, continued the conversation.

"——Utsusemi, the reason we refer to your fellow classmates as such, do you want to know the reason?"

Even without Tobio's answer, Himejima Hanezu immediately continued talking as he stepped forward.

"Clearly it can be understood to be related to the name of our organization……. Utsusemi, it's the same name. ——It means 'humans'. Thus, the cast off skin of a cicada. Something which is hollow. ……Though born into a family with a righteous lineage of supernatural powers, yet not possessing the power passed on by that family, those were the people that we have recruited to our objective. As far as the people from the Clans are concerned, those people who didn't possess the power the family desired, they weren't 'human'. They were merely 'incompetent'."

His eyes——were gloomy with self-mockery, without any radiance within them.

"We who were rejected by that value system were hollow existences—— Utsusemi."

"……Then, the reason to call everyone as such……?"

At Tobio's inquiry Himejima Hanezu shrugged his shoulders.

"——Even when provided with power, they were still only human. ……Remember this well, Ikuse Tobio. On our side, the definition of what is called 'human' is as varied as the number of people. Sooner or later, this is something you'll likely have to confront."

……The definition of 'human'. In regard to that Tobio did not presently have a clear answer, something which Himejima Hanezu was sufficiently aware of.

He then, from his breast pocket——produced a tokko[36]. It was a ritual implement with sharp pestle-type implements at both ends. Upon Himejima Hanezu's recitation of a whispered spell, the tokko automatically began floating in the air. It then revolving around him. Thereupon, before anyone noticed, there were two tokko. He supposed

[36] another religious use tool, apparently similar to a single-pronged Vajra

he could have misjudged, but the number of tokko continued to increase, three, four, five……the number had exceeded ten, all flying around the surroundings.

Himejima Hanezu spoke under these circumstances.

"……I, from the time I was a child, have excelled at handling ritual implements such as this. Purely in regards to this, even among the Himejima, I was number one in prominence."

Once again he produced the shakujou within his hands. Step by step he began to approach Tobio. Even while doing that though he continued speaking.

"My own house of Himejima, it's a Shinto clan. Including the ancient Hinokagutsuchi[37], we have faith in the gods of that religious system. Naturally many were born possessing the supernatural ability to manipulate flames. ……As for myself, I was not blessed with such power. Despite believing in the Hinokagutsuchi, as well as all the gods of that system I was unable to receive any of that divine protection. As a result, here I am now. ——For those who were unable to conform to the circumstances of the clans, even though we originated from the clans, we have been relegated to this. This is the justice they have strictly observed since ancient times."

That is to say, for him who didn't possess the power of the Himejima——the power of fire, there was no place for him outside of the 'Utsusemi Agency'?

What Tobio had heard was worrisome.

"……Let me ask you one thing. Are the 'Four Fiends' and my ability also things originating from the gods of Japanese mythology?"

Himejima Hanezu shook his head.

[37] Fire of Kagutsuchi, a fire deity

"……No, the sacred treasures——those supernatural powers which are called Sacred Gears, they were not created by a system of gods belonging to Japan. Regarding that, it's a creation of Christianity——the God of the Bible. Consequently they were originally an existence that is incompatible with us. It is heathenism, the very thing itself being a heresy."

……There was no relation between Jin and the Hinokagutsuchi? It was something involving the God of Christianity…….

Tobio was perplexed at this unforeseen truth, the reality he had been convinced of was again floating before his eyes.

The black angel he had encountered when he was a child——. The organization that was protecting Tobio and the other survivors——the Grigori. From the conversation with Himejima Hanezu, Tobio was beginning to understand little by little. It was seemingly absurd talk, and yet the summary of all that was said fits together consistently.

The aforementioned tokko that Himejima Hanezu was manipulating, they had completely captured Tobio and Jin.

"It would seem that the subordinates of the Five Principal Clans will arrive here very soon. Indeed, from the time I had encountered you and that young girl it was already my loss."

He then, "Kukuku," let out a suppressed laugh.

"'Governor General' Azazel, you had made certain of this from the beginning. ……Well this seems okay. Regarding this alliance of like minded people, those 'witches' that joined up with us have likely already fled. The techniques we have cultivated here, it seems they will continue to develop it accordingly. The 'Four Fiends Project' will be continued, and it will grant the deep-seated wish those witches are seeking. It would be nice if we respectively were able to accomplish our revenge against the Clans. ——But, I shall not achieve that."

Himejima Hanezu stood before Tobio. In spite of his self-derision, he said this.

“——Himejima Tobio. Grant my desire. Make it come true. Remake the ominous blade of the black dog born to the Himejima. And then, kill me with that ominous blade. I won’t die by the hands of those guys. If I am to die, allow me to perish by your black blade. ——Can you understand this?”

Tobio was exacerbated by Himejima Hanezu who was repeatedly saying things that were impossible to understand.

“DON’T SCREW WITH ME! Doing something like that! That only results in sorrow! Just to die in the end!? Moreover, you even want to be killed by me!? Don’t screw with me! DON’T YOU SCREW WITH ME! Besides! I……I’M NOT A HIMEJIMA! I’m Ikuse! IKUSE TOBIO!”

Tobio was yelling those angry words, and yet Himejima Hanezu was still wearing that thin smile.

“No, you are a Himejima. If you were not, we would not be here. That’s what drew you into all of this, the blood of the Five Principal Clans. Particularly because the power you wield is black more than anything else. It’s pitch black. As the one harboring that darkness, it dishonors you to speak such ignorant lip service. Don’t you think that even among your companions you stand out the most?”

“YOU’RE CRAZY!”

Responding to Tobio’s scream Jin leapt forward! Moreover all of the numerous tokko floating in the air around Himejima Hanezu faced towards Jin. Jin, a single-edged blade growing from his forehead, knocked down one of the tokko. ——But, with the exception of that tokko the rest changed their trajectory in mid air, the pointed ends thrusting towards Jin’s flank! Jin moved to avoid them entirely, the tokko also moved after him, and at last, they captured the puppy and pierced his abdomen! Jin let out a shriek “KYAN!” as he was knocked to the floor by that single hit from the tokko!

Jin, his whole body trembling, stood up. The tokko’s attack having been quite severe, Jin “KAHA!” coughed up a clot of blood. Just the amount

of damage that Jin had suffered from that one blow…….The power of the man's magic——the power of Buddhism that was infused into the tokko was quite strong.

However, nevertheless Jin hadn't given up, his pupils shining red. From the shadow at Himejima Hanezu's feet, a Haken appeared! However, he had already seen through the attack. Anticipating it he evaded easily, destroying it with a sweeping blow from the shakujou.

As this was happening, several of the tokko flying through the air, setting their sights on Tobio this time, attacked. Just before taking a direct hit, a Haken formed from the shadows at Tobio's feet in the form of a shield, but just before hitting the tokko changed their trajectory in mid air following an arc, sidestepping the Haken, and went flying at Tobio! At wits end, Tobio's whole body was struck by several tokko!

"……GUWA!"

His shoulder, back, arm, waist, leg, all of these places were struck by the tokko, producing a thick sound. Just as he was assaulted by the pain, fell to his knees on the spot. It was fortunate that his head hadn't been struck……they had purposefully not been aimed to strike there. It would have reached an immediate conclusion had he aimed at his head. That wasn't what he desired.

……Together with the pain in his left arm and right leg it was as if they weren't functioning either. His arm and leg were limp. ……It seemed the bones were fractured. The arm aside, having lost the leg was fatal. ……Already, Tobio was no longer able to move around.

His master being on the verge of a crisis, a blackness sprung forth from Jin's whole body, enhancing his power all the more, but the puppy itself had already suffered serious damage. Again and again he vomited blood from his mouth. His internal organs had been injured. In this situation, JIn——.

At this the black lion also joined in the offensive. Shaking its large body, "Gurururu" it let out a low growl. Jin was also undoubtedly menacing

but……. The black lion in addition to Himejima Hanezu. It was a desperate battle.

Jin caused a Haken to shoot out of the shadow at the lion's feet, but the lion leapt to the side to evade it. The lion took a deep breath, expanding its abdomen. The next moment, the lion spat out enormous flames from its mouth targeting Jin!

While expelling blood from his mouth Jin evaded these flames. Without waiting a moment, the lion expanded the shadow at its feet. In an instant its large body sank into the shadows. Only its shadow was left, and that shadow scattered in all directions and ran across the entirety of the outlook room.

The shadows produced by the lion each possessed individual will. Each of the shadows that had scattered relentlessly pursued Jin. One of the divided shadows captured Jin as he was running around. The rest of the shattered shadows converged there, again forming a large shadow. From this the lion emerged. Having been captured by the shadows, Jin sprouted blades from his body to cut away the shadows——but at the same moment he was struck by a blow from the lion's downward swinging forefoot.

"KYAN!", a thin scream echoed throughout the outlook room. Having bounced across the floor several times, Jin was laying there exhausted, unable to stand up.

"JIN——!"

His partner, the appearance of the puppy that was his other self, Tobio screamed as he dragged himself towards the body.

Neither Himejima Hanezu nor the black lion gave pursuit towards Tobio's crawling form. It was already clear that the battle situation would not be overturned. The opponent was far superior to Tobio and company. Even if they were to all take him on at once, defeat was inevitable.

While shedding tears, Tobio crawled along the floor barely managing to reach Jin. The pain he was feeling, that was nothing compared to what Jin was experiencing. For himself who had no power, his small partner had been desperately fighting. Jin, though still breathing, Tobio understood that his life was on the brink of being snuffed out.

"……Thank you……sorry, so sorry……I……because I'm so weak……I got you involved in this……I'm so sorry."

Tobio held Jin in an embrace, speaking his absolute thanks and apology.

Himejima Hanezu spoke while shaking his head.

"……You said that I was crazy. That was deserved. Since taking my place here, a normal mind hasn't existed for me. But, Ikuse Tobio. You haven't changed your ominous blade here, even omitting this state of affairs it's not as bright as before. Since the time you were born inheriting the blood of the Himejima, it was impossible for you to be able to live a life the same as a normal human being."

In contrast with Himejima Hanezu's sighing, Tobio complained while letting out sobs.

"……I……merely wanted normalcy. And, merely for recovering that life……. Just to keep living with Sae and everyone, the students of that high school……!! Why would you people ruin that……? For what……myself, Sae, and even Jin here……!!"

Indeed, Ikuse Tobio——merely sought to reclaim that life he had lost. To spend time with Sae, with his fellow classmates at that high school, to simply live his life like that. The desire to be an ordinary high school student, it was simply an ordinarily commonplace desire.

As for possessing supernatural power, since he was to be nothing more than a seventeen year old high school student——.

Someone brushed the cheek of Tobio who was shedding tears. Tobio, as well as Himejima Hanezu, were astounded by what they saw.

"……Coming to this place, all to take me back?"

Himejima Hanezu's eyes widened in astonishment at the actions of that person.

Sae, as tears poured down her cheeks, was standing before Tobio. Sae stroked Jin's head as Tobio held him in his arms. From that head, a blade was still sprouting.

She, while wearing a pleasant expression announced to Tobio.

"……I'm truly……sorry. Was it……harsh?"

Sae——embraced Jin. The blade growing from his head, it pierced Sae's chest——. Obvious to everyone who saw it——the action left a fatal wound. Still embracing Jin, Sae lost all strength and laid down on the spot. Tobio embraced the collapsed Sae. While smiling, Sae gently brushed the cheek of the dumbfounded Tobio.

"……Don't cry……Tobio……"

Tobio took her hand and tried to call out her name, but at that moment his voice wouldn't come out.

"……I……was happy……to meet you again……"

Still smiling, her hand slipped from Tobio's hand——.

"……"

Tobio was at a loss for words. He kept shaking his head from side to side, unable to accept this reality.

Tobio——had come to rescue her.

This girl named Toujou Sae——.

For him who had lost his entire family, she was the only person important to him. The one he most wished to save. While embracing her who was lying there, Tobio overcame his muteness.

"……Aa……A, UAaaaaa……aaaaa……!!!"

……However, that life he had merely wanted to continue living.

……However, to merely pass the time uneventfully, tranquilly.

……However…….

……However……to merely have continued living an ordinary everyday life with Sae…….

"AaaaAAAAAAAAAaaaaa……aaAAAAAA!!!"

Everything he had wished for having been severed, Tobio, tormented by despair, wailed.

As Himejima Hanezu was watching this, a mysterious luminescent phenomenon was emitted from his breast pocket. Sensing this, he retrieved a wooden box from his breast pocket. That was what Himejima Hanezu had previously withheld from Tobio at Toujou Sae's house. That was what Tobio's grandmother Ageha had bequeathed to him——.

When Himejima Hanezu opened the wooden box, what was there was a tiny crystal. The crystal was giving off a bluish-white glow.

Suddenly a voice was emitted from the crystal.

'The fact that this seal has been undone is unfortunate, but it is apparent that someone is abusing Tobio's power, or else it seems that supernatural malicious intent has been inflicted upon that child.'

Tobio remembered the owner of that voice. It was the voice of the dearly beloved relative that was his grandmother.

"……The crystal is a recording of Ikuse Tobio's grandmother, Ageha-dono's voice?"

This was what Himejima Hanezu determined.

The voice of his grandmother continued to be emitted from the crystal.

'Speaking to those who came into contact with Tobio while possessing evil intent. I who have great compassion for that child have raised him to be a gentle child. At any rate, that child……from the time of his birth he has possessed the 'merely-an-imitation-god's' forbidden technique.'

Hearing that, Himejima Hanezu's facial expression——completely changed. Those eyes that had been watching with a fickle expression this entire time, were full of astonishment.

"……!!! The forbidden……move……!? That's ridiculous……!!!"

The words of his grandmother's voice from the crystal were truly terrifying.

'I am informing those who have approached that child possessing malicious intent. Having done this, since you have inflicted that child with malicious intentions, it might be nice if you were to thoroughly taste the god-slaying blade with your own body. ——Even your souls will be completely hewn apart.'

The voice of the crystal continued speaking even more. This time it made a simple appeal to Tobio.

"——Tobio, I'm sorry. It must be harsh. It must be frightening. I ask that you please forgive me for not previously conveying the truth to you."

It was the usual strict yet kind voice of his grandmother. For the present Tobio, it was unmistakable. It penetrated his mind and body more than anything else. While experiencing an optical illusion similar to his grandmother kindly brushing his head, he listened carefully to the voice from the crystal.

"Nevertheless, Tobio. By now, it's okay right? By now, there's no need to be afraid anymore. There's no need to cry anymore. ——Sing. Even if you had forgotten, by now you should have recalled it. Therefore, sing. ——The forbidden song of the god'

Hearing his grandmother's voice, a memory rose to the surface of Tobio's mind. A memory that had been sealed within the depths of his memory——.

A day when he was very young, Tobio had been escorted to a certain shrine, and was instructed to do something within the inner sanctuary.

——*Are you okay, Tobio?*

His grandmother was tracing some kind of character on the forehead of the young Tobio with her finger.

——Supposing, if there is ever a time you are truly lost, I'll teach you an 'incantation' that will save you.

Beside Tobio——a large black dog was sitting there before he had noticed.

——However, can you keep this in reserve until the very last moment?

The dog's red eyes captured Tobio. At that moment he realized his heart was pounding.

——Since this 'incantation', it will take everything from Tobio.

As his grandmother embraced Tobio, she taught him the 'incantation', speaking in his ear.

——You have not yet finished becoming a man.

Thereupon, the black dog——while narrowing its red eyes its figure was erased.

That sequence of memories was what Tobio had recalled at that moment. Simultaneously, the 'incantation' he grandmother had taught was refreshed within his mind.

Tobio, while embracing Sae and Jin, suddenly laughed.

It's okay, Baa-chan.

I……am ready to become a man……!

Those who stole the tranquility of mine and……Sae……I won't forgive them.

Therefore, Baa-chan.

I——will sing.

If they are going to unreasonable assault me, us, then I, we, will be unreasonable in return……!

At last Tobio began to speak——.

<<——I sing for the slaying of a thousand humans>>

Tobio and Jin were each enveloped by a black haze. This gradually spread, filling up the outlook room.

<<——I celebrate the slaying of ten thousand goblins>>

The black haze was applied to his arm and leg that had been broken, and the pain subsided in an instant.

<<——The name submerged in total darkness, that of the imitation god that drifts through the polar night>>

Tobio immediately stood up. Jin who had been completely exhausted——a black shadow spread from his feet, no, he was submerged within the darkness.

<<——Thou will perish by mine own black blade>>

Tobio's whole body was covered by the black haze, which was clinging to his body, and was being absorbed. His form transforming little by little, no longer the form of a human, he had become **something** that differed from a human being.

More and more darkness was expelled outwards from Tobio in massive quantities, forming his new appearance. Having forelegs, hindlegs, and possessing a tail, it opened its mouth that had become massive.

Being produced in addition to that, it also possessed jet black fur like an enormous dog——no, it was a <<Hound>>.[38]

<<——To be something absurd, the god of the deformed>>

As Tobio spoke this final stanza, the jet black <<Hound>> let loose a penetrating howl.

OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOooooooooooOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

received Vali's leak, had released their agents, they were sending those with whom Natsume was acquainted, the relatives of the fellow classmates who had been retrieved from the cultivation tanks, one by one through the magic square of transportation.

Immediately upon invading this base, they had tied up one of the agency members and he had spilled the beans about this location. Having arrived, they had already shut down the equipment in this room, so all that was left was to retrieve them. Natsume had Griffon release a sudden gust, swiftly destroying all of the cultivation tanks.

Seeing this scene, Vali,

"That's a good arrangement"

Said only that much with a fearless smile. With the destruction of the equipment in this room, it was likely that someone was already aware of this.

Natsume then began to pick up and move her fellow classmates who had collapsed in the passageway into the center of the magic circle Vali had had drawn for their relatives, which would send them to the Grigori Institute.

There were still some Utsusemi monsters squirming within the facility, but with the gigantic beast that was the transformed Griffon as an opponent, the 'Four Fiend' that had transformed from a falcon, by means of a sudden gust, minced them all.

As for the relatives of her fellow classmates that had been put in the cultivation tanks, they had finished transporting all of them to the Grigori Institute. The fellow classmates who had lost their Utsusemi were also caused to jump through the magic square.

"Vali! Are you searching for clues or something? Why are there classmates here and there that you haven't sent already?"

Natsume asked. Vali was closing his eyes, sharpening his senses to detect any sign.

"……I am."

At that report Natsume decided to resign herself. It was okay to take their time. It was okay if they came across the Five Principal Clan's agents. They had saved everyone! They had rescued all of the fellow classmates!

Thinking about that while wearing a seemingly surprised expression, he abruptly put on a frightening smile.

"……This is also fine."

Vali, having become excited, controlled his breathing before speaking to Natsume.

"All that's left is to pick up him. Look up Minagawa Natsume. The 'Hound'——Ikuse Tobio is there."

"B-but!"

She herself also wanted to rescue everyone. Anticipating this feeling, Vali shook his head.

"Rather than the Utsusemi pupils, if you cannot suppress the 'Hound' up above, you realize that you may not have a second chance to return?"

So said Vali. Simultaneously, Natsume was left at a loss for words by the phenomenon that was occurring within the room.

——From every location, warped blades began sprouting up.

This was familiar. It was only natural. Since they resembled the warped blades that the puppy Ikuse Tobio possessed——Jin had released. It should be that those would sprout from an object's shadow. However, this was different. An inexhaustible supply was sprouting from all over. From the ceiling, the floor, the walls, the various types of equipment——. It didn't seem like it was limited to this room either. In all likelihood, the entire based had sprouted warped blades.

Seeing this phenomenon, Natsume instinctively understood the true meaning of Vali's words.

"I understand. I'll go to the place where Ikuse-kun is first."

Announcing this, Natsume ran off entrusting this place behind her to Vali.

Running through the passageway, she proceeded to take the emergency stairwell straight up. From every spot in the stairwell, blades were appearing one after another. She steadily ran upwards, climbing up the first stairway in one go and exiting into a passageway. Up ahead she confirmed a large double door.

Having run until she was before this door, the instant Natsume touched the door she experienced a feeling as though the pores all over her body had opened. For an instant, her entire body had trembled. Whatever was inside was causing her to feel uneasy. Even though she had erased her presence and was accompanied by the large build of Griffon, it was causing her whole body to tremble.

Gulping down her saliva Natsume entered and looked around——.

It was an abnormal world of blades. From throughout the entire room's interior, every object had countless blades sprouting from it. There were some which were straight, some which were curves, even some that were zigzagged in shape. Floating in this immense darkness there was a bright light. There was a figure who was illuminated by this bright light, that of a middle aged man wielding a shakujou with a gigantic lion beside him. And then, giving off an ominous jet black aura, were a pair of beasts.

One was a large black dog. Although there weren't any blades growing from his body, the face was that of Jin. Were that puppy to have grown up well, its appearance would likely be something like this.

Now the other one——while possessing a dog's form it was a humanoid monster. It had a protruding mouth like that of a dog, and its ears stood up like pins. From its mouth its bared sharp fangs could be seen. The

arm resembled that of a human, but it had sprouted razor sharp claws. Its legs were identical to those of a dog, only it was standing on two legs. From its back grew six tails——.

Seemingly sensing Natsume's arrival, the man spoke while looking over in her direction.

"……Minagawa Natsume is it? Fufufu, how good of you to have come. Nice to meet you, I am Himejima Hanezu. I presume you've probably heard this name before, right?"

Himejima Hanezu——. The one from the 'Utussemi Agency'. Natsume understood that this was the person that had appeared before Ikuse Tobio and Samejima Kouki.

Himejima Hanezu again set his sights upon the pair of black beasts.

"……You should understand somewhat, right?"

Regarding Himejima Hanezu who had asked this, floating in his surroundings were several ritual implements——tokko which were facing towards the black beasts. These ritual implements possessing supernatural power, they moved freely through the air as they attacked the black beasts!

<<KILL **kill** *kill KILL* **Kill KILL** *kill* KILL **kill** *kill KILL* **Kill KILL** *kill* KILL **kill** *kill KILL* **Kill KILL** *kill* KILL **kill** *kill KILL* **Kill KILL** *kill*lllllllllllllLLLLLLLLLLLLL!!!!>>[39]

From the mouth of the humanoid black beast something like a curse was being spat out. Hearing it made one's mind feel odd, such was the power possessed by the resentment in this one voice.

The tokko Himejima Hanezu has fired, they all failed to score a direct hit. From the ceiling, floor, and walls the numerous blades extended, resulting in all of the tokko being chopped apart.

[39] He's saying "kiru=kill" over and over using different kanji, hiragana, and katakana

At this result Himejima Hanezu was anything but astonished, he was in ecstasy.

"……Already my tokko have been seen through huh. You just saw it, Minagawa Natsume."

He pointed in the direction of a windowed wall. In all likelihood, this was an outlook room, which had been made for the purpose of observing the scenery outside. That scenery——had been repainted in black. The entire visible scenery had become a world of mountains engulfed by blackness——. Even the scenery of the sky had been dyed black, wrapping the entire region in jet blackness.

……When Natsume had arrived at this base the sun had still been up. It should still be too early for the sun to have set already!

As she watched, from here and there throughout the mountain forests gigantic distorted blades were springing up successively. The entirety of the surrounding was being buried by the force of these bizarre blade-like objects.

……Natsume once again looked in the direction of the black beast. Already, Natsume had understood. That humanoid black beast must be Tobio. In the corner of the room she was able to confirm the figure of a young girl lying on the floor.

……Seeing that, Natusme reached a rough estimation. After experiencing extreme sadness, he had——.

——changed into a beast.

Tobio was standing right before her, in the form of a black beast.

After releasing a brave roar, the black lion sank into the shadows that had extended beneath its feet. Once the lion was within its shadow, the shadow scattered and began shooting around the room. As each of them crawled along seemingly with independent will, Tobio merely watched patiently. Thereupon, raising both arms up high, he immediately swung them down. Instantly, within the room countless huge blades sprung

from the floor, piercing through to the ceiling! Some of the blades had captured the black shadow, and the captured shadow was once again forming the form of a lion.

The lion——had been skewered by the blades, but by violently shaking its huge body it forcibly destroyed he blades. With the lion having been released, it raced across the floor at high speed closing the distance to Tobio, but Tobio also vanished in an instant, and without a sound the battle commenced.

Tobio and the lion were moving at a speed beyond Natsume's perception as they battled. As the two black beasts were battling, there was also a black <<Hound>> left behind——Jin who was steadily walking around the room, his red eyes shining mysteriously.

With a *ZUN!* a single large thick blade appeared from behind Jin. The black lion was pierced by this. Jin, having sensed the lion's movements, had followed up for Tobio. Tobio revealed his form as he approached the lion head on.

While in that pierced condition the lion breathed out flames at the approaching Tobio but——. Without any hesitation at all, and without evading, facing straight forward, stabbed into the blaze with both of his sharp hands! He kept stabbing with both hands until they reached the source of the flames it was breathing out of its mouth!

<<KILL **kill** *kill* ***KILL*** **KILL** *KILL* ***kill*** KILL **kill** *kill* ***KILL*** **KILL** *KILL* ***kill*** KILL **kill** *kill* ***KILL*** **KILL** *KILL* ***killllllllLLLLLLLLLLLL***!!!>>[40]

Releasing a shriek of deeply held resentment, Tobio slipped his hands into its mouth and in one forcibly spread them apart!

The lion, its body ripped right in half, tumbled to the floor. With the apparent death to its body, the lion melted away into the darkness——.

Natsume was unable to watch such an otherworldly spectacle without shuddering. There was movement——perhaps she herself would be

[40] Essentially, he's saying "korosu (kill)" over and over but with different kanji and/or using hiragana and katakana. That said, not all the kanji actually mean "kill".

seen as an opponent as well. Such was the degree of the fearsome ominous aura Tobio and Jin were releasing.

Tobio and Jin had destroyed the lion. As for the next objective, it appeared to be Himejima Hanezu.

However, there was a third party that appeared at that moment. It was a silver haired youth——Vali. Upon seeing this scenery, Vali whole body began trembling as he smiled with ecstasy.

"……In spite of visually confirming Minagawa Natsume he's hasn't returned to normal. ……Azazel……!! Isn't this different than what you said……!! What was that about a 'cute dog comparable to a heavenly dragon'……!! This is……that monster is……!!"

Putting aside the youth's trembling voice, another familiar voice was heard reverberating throughout the room.

'Repainting the surrounding landscape on top of changing into a black beast huh. Geez, that I would happen to meet a Longinus with such a shady history.'

The plush dragon on Vali's shoulder——its mouth was moving on its own,

The voice of the 'Governor General' was coming from it.

The 'Governor General' addressed Himejima Hanezu.

'Yo, chief engineer-dono'

"——!! ……Grigori huh."

Himejima Hanezu immediately guessed as to the identity of the voice he was hearing.

'How about it? His power is quite irregular?'

The tone of the 'Governor General's' voice was cynical.

"……This is that 'Dog' isn't it? The one incarnation that overthrows gods……it must be the dog of the black blade."

'Ahh, that's it. That's the correct understanding. His black blade is the one said to cut even god. However, in any case, I hear that boy was born naturally being able to express the Sacred Gear.'

"Isn't that something particularly rare? The case of one being naturally born with that——"

The 'Governor General' continued Himejima Hanezu's words.

'Ahh, that's right. ——Ikuse Tobio was one who was naturally born that way.'

"……That such a thing was possible……"

Contrary to Himejima Hanezu who was smiling fearlessly, Vali narrowed his eyes saying, "It's not such an irregular thing."

The 'Governor General' continued.

'Ikuse Tobio's grandmother placed a seal on her grandchild who was naturally born possessing power to break the balance of the world. You guys came casually into contact with that in such a reckless and rude manner——. You wanted to see it didn't you? Abandoning everything for the sake of seeing this form right? That comes at a price. It's nice to be able to enjoy being able to freely watch you getting sliced apart.'

Hearing that, Himejima Hanezu sneered.

"……Kukuku, given the case of the 'lightning', as well as this case, even though the bloodline of the Himejima has been cursed, Oji-ue[41]……!!"

That sneer, it was a level of ugliness that he hadn't shown until now, however, he put on a satisfied smile.

[41] uncle

Himejima Hanezu took one step forward. His expression was one of satisfaction.

"——It should be possible for you with one of those ominous blades."

He took one step towards Tobio, then one more. Again he launched the tokko, and again they were completely shot down. He also attacked with the shakujou in his hands, but a blade was produced from the shadow beneath Jin's feet, cutting off both of his arms. Despite losing his arms Himejima Hanezu again drew closer.

——Tobio calmly swiped horizontally with his arm.

Approaching until he was right before his eyes, Himejima Hanezu spoke.

"The Five Principal Clans, the Himejima, destroy them."

Announcing that, Himejima Hanezu's head went flying in an arc after being severed from his body by a blade protruding from the floor——.

The black lion, Himejima Hanezu, both had been defeated by Tobio and Jin——.

Natsume and Vali had been watching this happen…….

"——Well, how about it? Has it been boring for you having yet to encounter the 'Red One', Vali?"

While saying that, the figure of a man was revealed at that point, a beard growing from his chin. The suit he was wearing was very disorderly, giving him a very tough impression.

"……It's just your imagination, 'Governor General'. ——No, Azazel. I mean, for you to have come here expressly, particularly since you can simply transmit your voice through this dragon."

Grinning, the man called 'Governor General' gently brushed Vali's head.

Looking over at Natsume, the man gave a self-introduction.

“Nice to meet you, Minagawa Natsume. I am Azazel the ‘Governor General’.”

This man was the ‘Governor General’——. Despite finally meeting the one who she had only known by voice, this wasn’t a situation where Natsume would become especially emotional.

For starters, they have yet to come up with some means or another to stop Ikuse Tobio who was before their eyes. Appearing immediately as Natsume was thinking of such things, there was Lavinia looking completely worn out.

“I am just a little bit late, Natsume.”

“Lavinia!”

The two of them having exchanged a brief reunion greeting, Lavinia spoke to the ‘Governor General’——the one called Azazel.

“That you would show your honorable face is quite a big deal Governor General Azazel.”

While saying this, she looked over at the completely transformed Tobio.

“……I see, this is what the big deal is.”

Having merely just seen it Lavinia seemed to understand what had happened.

Azazel then asked.

“Lavinia. ……Did those guys escape?”

Lavinia sighed.

“I feel very regretful.”

“No, from the beginning I had understood that they would extremely troublesome.”

Shrugging his shoulders, Azazel set his sights on Tobio.

“Now then, Lavinia, Vali. ——Let’s stop that. Lend me your power.”

Azazel took one step forward and Vali began following right behind him.

“Good grief, I’m always being asked to clean up afterwards. ——How long do I have to put up with this cruelty?”

Lavinia also took off her worn out hat, and began advancing towards Tobio.

“Toby, please come and return to us. Haven’t we not yet conversed enough?”

The three of them selected a fixed distance.

Glowing wings grew from Vali’s back, a magic square filled with powerful magic formed beneath Lavinia’s feet, and simultaneously she summoned the ice princess to appear beside her.

As cold air began to circulate within the room, Azazel who was leading——had 12 black wings appear from his back with a *kasakasa* sound!

Lavinia spread her arms, and the princess simultaneously did the same. The room was instantly frozen. Even the countless blades that were sprouting up had been frozen over, Lavinia’s world of ice. Tobio and Jin had also been encased in ice. However, the ice engulfing them immediately began to crack.

“Ikuse’s Baa-chan! You had used Buddhist magic in order to manage it!”

From his breast pocket, Azazel produced something similar to a sutra[42]. While tying a token to his hand, he opened the sutra. The sutra started glowing, with multiple characters floating up into the air. These floating characters, they surrounded Tobio and Jin while laced with power. The characters became a single, long chain that bound Tobio and Jin.

The encasement in ice together with the characters from the sutra were restraining Tobio and Jin——.

"Vali! Steal his power now!"

Hearing Azazel's order, Vali quickly flapped his light wings and closed in on Tobio and Jin, touching each of them once.

The silver haired youth snapped his fingers while floating in the air.

"——Halve."

'Divide!!'

A powerful voice reverberated within the room, and even Natsume noticed that the power surrounding Tobio had immediately been reduced. Furthermore when the voice said 'Divide!!' , there was a light released from Vali's light wings in concert with it.

Gradually Tobio and Jin were losing power. As they watched, the darkness outside was steadily clearing, and the gigantic blades were beginning to crack. After a short while, Tobio dropped to his knees on the spot. And simultaneously with the cleansing of the dark regions, the countless blades crumbled and dissolved. The dark clothes that had been covering Tobio had come off, and his true appearance began to become visible. Jin was also losing strength, having bent down on the spot——.

Due to the teamwork of Azazel, Vali, and Lavinia, Tobio was beginning to wake with the total conclusion of the supernatural phenomenon, and the room's interior was also returning to how it was originally. Visible

[42] religious text

through the glass wall was the splendid mountain forest scenery that was spread out before them.

Confirming all of this, Azazel sighed.

"——Phew, with this one task has been completed huh. The Himejima follow Shintoism, yet she was familiar with the sutra of Buddhism. For that she was banished, Ikuse's grandmother."

Leaving behind Azazel who was muttering such words, Natsume rushed towards Tobio who had returned to normal.

"Ikuse-kun!"

Natsume confirmed that the fallen Tobio was breathing. He……was still breathing.

He was alive! He was still alive……!! She was able to confirm that Jin who had transformed into a large dog was also breathing while lying down.

Lavinia placed a hand on Natsume's shoulder.

"Everyone, they are all safe. Now, let us return, Natsume."

Natsume, wiping her overflowing tears away with her arm, nodded——.

Epilogue

Part 1

When Tobio opened his eyes——he was in an unknown sickroom. He himself was lying on the bed. There was an IV drip injected into his arm. Having regained consciousness, Tobio raised his upper body.

……His memory was vague, but he was able to recall to some extent what had happened in the outlook room. Someone addressed him as he was bowing his head.

"You have awakened, Ikuse Tobio."

Looking over, there was a man squatting on a stool a short way away. The man spoke while closing the book he had been reading.

"I will once again introduce myself. I am Azazel. I am the leader of those who watch over the children of God——the organization called 'Grigori'."

……This man was the 'Governor General. Azazel. Leader of the Grigori…….

Azazel continued speaking.

"Regarding my organization……well, we study a variety of supernatural phenomenon, measuring them, and one of those is the study of Sacred Gears. What we handle is extensive, from the abilities to the users."

The man's gaze was directed towards the far side of Tobio's bed. Tobio followed his gaze as well——on the far side of the bed there was a large black dog that was curled up asleep. Tobio was instantly able to understand that this was Jin.

Azazel made an announcement while gazing at Jin.

Your other self——the true nature of <Jin>, it is one of the Sacred Gears we call Longinus. Its official name is Canis Lycaon."

"Longinus……"

"There are only thirteen varieties, those for which it has been determined to have the ability capable of slaying God. That is what you possess, something that is theoretically capable of slaughtering even God."

Slaughtering even God……? Tobio truly felt that this was beyond extraordinary.

“Natsume’s and Samejima’s Sacred Gears……are different?”

“Aah, they may look similar but they are different. However, one of the abilities of ‘Canis Lycaon’ is that it calls together Sacred Gears of the same wavelength.”

“……Then, the abilities of those two, Jin……no, I had unknowingly caused those abilities to be expressed?”

…….Minagawa Natsume, Semjima Kouki, the other ‘Four Fiends’ who had not yet appeared, and even my fellow classmates. Everyone who had gotten caught up in these events, it was originally all the result of my ability summoning the ‘Four Fiends’……?

Azazel informed Tobio who was being tormented by his awareness of this sin.

“It does seem that they were summoned by your ability. ——However, those who abused that, that was the group from the ‘Utsusemi Agency’.”

“……Since I possessed the blood of the Himejima from the beginning though……”

To Tobio who speaking as such with his head bowed, Azazel sighed while merely scratching the back of his head.

“Your ability, it’s one of the powers capable of breaking the balance of the world. Naturally, you were a subject strict monitoring. In such cases, in order to seal you and your ability, it would be a must to eliminate you. That’s the extent of your ability. Moreover, since you had been born that way, that ability to break the balance of the world was strengthening. It would have been a natural result if you had been erased in infancy.”

Azazel spoke while looking at the scenery visible through the window.

"……However, both of your parents and your grandmother, they chose to let you live. An act of this extent can be said to be quite immense. ——However, at that time, I happened to come to lay eyes upon you when you were very young. ……Ikuse Ageha it seems had out of love for you placed a seal upon the dog's power. I must say it was nothing if not magnificent."

……Baa-chan.

The memory of that strict yet simple grandmother was resurrected in Tobio's mind. The grandmother, who until she died had respectfully raised him. His grandmother's good intentions had taken root in the depths of his heart even now.

Ant thus, from what this man had said, he now had gained an understanding of the truth behind that experience he recalled from childhood.

"……As expected, you are……from that time?"

Before the eyes of Tobio who had inquired thus, the man grew twelve black wings from his back.

Indeed, this was the black angel he had encountered by chance.

The black angel——Azazel brushed Tobio's head with smiling bitterly.

"——Yeah, in actuality, it was a major thing, boy of the dog. As for myself, I am what is called a fallen angel. A being that was exiled from heaven for embracing wickedness. ……It seems you're not gushing with emotion after hearing about angels."

Tobio shook his head from side to side.

"No, having seen Utsusemi, demons, and magicians, it wasn't surprising that there'd be angels……. It would be stranger if there weren't."

"There are numerous miraculous things in this world beyond your belief."

Azazel spoke completely straightforwardly.

“Our organization, we study Sacred Gears and also observe their owners. If we discover someone in possession of a powerful Sacred Gear, they become a target of observation. The reason we met when you were a young child, that was because there was a possibility that you were a Longinus possessor. Supposing, if one was the kind of person to abuse the Sacred Gear, even considering a case of just ability without your special characteristic, they would often times be eliminated. All for the sake of preserving the balance of the world. ——Since for things such as wars, I must apologize twice.”

Tobio as well enquired of his upfront honesty.

“——It would appear that I must have been a target for extermination, right?”

Azazel abruptly laughed.

“Originally that was the case. However, for two main reasons, that decision faltered.”

He raised two fingers.

“One was your individual ability. The case of one being naturally born with the prohibited condition to break the balance, to my knowledge, there are only a small number of such examples over the past thousand years. All of them with the exception of you had perished before we had become aware of them……. Having had been raised in tranquility for all these years in spite of such an ability. Though that does seem to be due to the protection of your relatives……it certainly was very interesting.”

Azazel now held up one finger having already explained one of the reasons. While smiling bitterly——.

“As for the other reason……well, Longinus possessors other than you entreated to us their desire to cease such methods of management. One of them was a student of mine. The other one was a magical girl sent by

an old acquaintance of mine. To refuse those guys' request would have been something I'd regret for the rest of my life."

Azazel spoke while letting out a sigh.

"At the moment, we are observing the situation of all of the 'Four Fiends'. Well, for the time being, it's a good way for my underling to become accustomed to his power. To start with, we must assemble the remainder of the 'Four Fiends'."

Somehow or another, it seemed things weren't yet settled. The ones who had earnestly requested this……apparently it was the silver haired youth and the blond young lady.

He himself was still alive. However——.

At that moment Tobio began to overflow with tears.

"……I……Sae……!! I wasn't able to rescue her……!!"

Of the events that had transpired in that outlook room, he recalled what had happened right before he chanted that spell. It had been seared into the back of his eyelids. Sae had embraced Jin who had a blade growing from his head. That blade of Jin's had pierced through her chest.

Tobio had been unable to rescue that cherished individual——.

With Tobio shedding nothing but tears, Azazel continued while scratching his cheek.

"——Well, we gradually came to this conversation. Well, this is good enough."

Prompted by that voice, the door to the sickroom opened. Appearing from there——was the figure of Sae sitting in a wheelchair.

Being at a loss for words at this incredible spectacle, Tobio was only able to mumble a single word.

"……Sae?"

Hearing Tobio's voice, Sae held her hands to her mouth.

"Tobio……"

Azazel informed Tobio who thought he must still be dreaming.

"……You remember those prayer beads your grandmother had left behind?"

Before the start of the school trip, Tobio had handed a string of prayer beads to Sae as a charm——.

"About that. It had a protective spell of your grandmother's placed upon it. What happened at that time was it had used its one time effect of substituting itself to protect the owner's body. Even though she was pierced by that dog's blade, there was no visible damage received by her body when it was removed. The prayer beads then shattered and dispersed."

——She was protected by Baa-chan's prayer beads.

……Baa-chan. ……Baa-chan is, even after dying, still protecting me, both me and Sae…….

With his grandmother's love, as well as Sae's safety, Tobio could do nothing but endlessly shed tears.

Azazel spoke up.

"……Regarding the care for the students of Ryoukou High School, they are presently undergoing treatment. After the Utsusemi have been removed, they are scheduled to be released along with their relatives. However, their memories of this current affair have been fabricated to a certain extent. Memories regarding them, regarding us……and regarding those fellows, it's all been taken care of. We will be strictly monitoring everyone from the agency, to the point that they would feel it would be better to just die."

Indeed, the relatives of their fellow classmates had been rescued from that hideout. Their fellow classmates……they were being hidden by the Grigori. It was good that they would lose their memories. With all the misfortune involved in these unfathomable events, it was better for ordinary people not to be aware of it. With only a little monitoring, they could continue living……that was always a good thing.

Azazel again added one more thing.

"……However, this child's memory was left as is. Since this child personally refused."

——!

……Tobio was speechless. Sae's memory of all that had happened in this incident, about Tobio being a supernatural power user, about she herself being utilized by the 'Utsusemi Agency', they had been left behind without being erased.

"Well then, see you later."

Leaving such parting words, Azazel left the sickroom.

Tobio and Sae were left behind. Making use of the wheelchair, Sae moved to Tobio's side.

Sae took Tobio's hand as she shed tears.

"……Tobio……I'm sorry. ……Was it harsh……? ……We, all of us……all because we were unable to fight back against them……I'm sorry, I'm truly sorry……"

"It's okay. So long as you're safe."

Tobio embraced Sae raising her from the wheelchair, and said just one thing.

"——Welcome home, Sae."

"……Tobio, I'm home."

Finally——.

Finally, she had come home from her long trip——.

Part 2

"You were safe huh, Ikuse!!"

Tobio was teasingly poked with a crutch by Samejima. Samejima had not yet fully recovered from his injuries, and was relying on crutches for his daily life. In a short while, it was said he would return to his regular life.

It had been ten days since that battle, and they had again gathered at the usual condominium. Tobio, Natsume, Samejima, Lavinia, Vali and now——Toujou Sae had joined their membership. Sae had not yet retired from using the wheelchair, and Samejima likewise still required a cane in his present condition.

Natsume spoke to Sae.

"That you wouldn't choose to leave behind those memories……even though it generally would be the more pleasant choice. Isn't it harsh?"

Such as in the case of Natsume's friend, it had also been Natsume's desire that the memories of those series of events be sealed. The matter of the trip as well had been covered with a skillfully fabricated memory. Regarding this, Samejima's buddy——Maeda was also the same.

Of the former second year students of Ryoukou High School, with the exception of those who possess Sacred Gears, Sae was the only one who was aware of the truth of the entire affair.

"Uh-uh. After all, Jin-chan is so cute."

Sae replied as such as Jin, who had transformed into a large dog, was licking her cheeks. For Jin who had undergone such major changes, it

wasn't that he had become more emotionally attached to Sae instead of Tobio, that was just an illusion caused by him getting spoiled by her.

Contrary to the transformed Jin, the Sacred Gears of Natsume and Samejima——Griffon and Byakusa, they had returned to the appearance of a falcon and cat respectively. Probably, they took on their previous forms for the purpose of convenience during everyday life, or so the Governor-General——Azazel had informed them.

They had all met up in the room where they had watched the video of the Utsusemi at the beginning. Squatting in the middle, Lavinia again recounted the reason why they had been asked to gather together here.

"There is no other purpose for having us gather together. It was so I can once again explain why I cooperated with everyone."

That is, what the reason was for Lavinia to participate with them against the 'Four Fiends Project' implemented by the 'Utsusemi Agency'.

Her pursuit of that magician, the one who had been cooperating with the 'Utsusemi Agency', how that had started in the first place. Those magicians, they had disappeared to someplace without inviting the survivors of the agency.

Lavinia explained.

"This is something from long ago. I belong to a magician association, one that was completely split in two due to a certain event. One half, remaining on Earth, has not had a change in management to this day. I am also a member of this organization which is called 'Grau Zauberer'. However, as for the other group, utilizing original barrier magic, constructed an original territory in the 'Dimensional Gap' which straddles the boundaries between the worlds."

Lavinia took out a single book. This was——a picture book. In all likelihood, it was a book that she wanted to show to everyone——.

"This book is?"

Lavinia continued speaking while taking the picture book in her hand.

"Appearing within this picture book is the proof behind the reality of this world that they created. The author became aware of this worlds by chance, and it is certainly the territory they had created in the 'Dimensional Gap'."

Lavinia then clearly stated.

"These wizards——they are the 'Wizards of Oz'."

——!

……As one would expect, all of the members found this information to be astounding. Only Vali accepted everything without being perturbed.

——As far as the old woman and young girl magicians they had encountered in the vast underground chamber were concerned……they were called 'The Wizards of Oz'?

Lavinia continued.

"I——Grau Zauberer along with the Gigori have been pursuing magicians who had infiltrated from the magical domain known as 'Oz'——they were collaborating with a traitor within the Grigori, leader class fallen angel 'Satanael'."

Oz——,

Moreover a traitor within the Grigori——'Satanael'.

While also being concerned about the movements of the remaining fellow students who were among the 'Four Fiends', also approaching Tobio and company was an otherworldly visitor they had not been expecting.

Thus begins, in the midst of the three way conflict between the 'Grigori' who pursue Sacred Gears, the 'Five Principal Clans' who govern the Four Divine Beasts and the Ouryuu, and the 'Wizards of Oz' who had

won over leader-class fallen angel Satanael, becoming the blade of the gang of the black wings, the story of the 'Dog' that slays an endless variety of supernatural powers.

This was the person, the one who would later become known as 'Slashdog'——.

Final Chapter - Five Principal Clans/Himejima

At a certain place——the main shrine of the Himejima Clan, members of the family were meeting in the outer sanctum. With equally stern expressions, all members present at this time were aware of the truth behind the events that had occurred. The base of the 'Utsusemi Agency' was more or less under control. ……Although a number of fugitives had escaped, the remains of one of the masterminds——those of Himejima Hanezu had been recovered. Because of that, for now at least everything had been resolved.

In the complete and utter silence, an aging man with a grim face who was squatting before the inner sanctum let out a whisper.

"——It would be nice if our ties to the fate of Grigori were brought to an end."

With that one sentence the outer sanctum erupted with noise. The members of the Clan all began speaking their views simultaneously.

"Suzerain[43], is that okay? We have seen that one case——the negotiations over Akeno already reach a conclusion but"

The aging man——the Himejima family Suzerain, let out a single sigh as though uninterested.

[43] religious title

“That was resolved through a secret agreement with the duke family of the seventy-two pillars. ——However, that black winged gang, with them consistently setting foot in the territory of the Himejima, even we cannot just sit back and watch. Protecting this country since antiquity, one of the five families, that is our own Himejima.”

These were not at all hesitant words. Strong unshakable will permeated throughout the minds and bodies of everyone present——.

The members of the Clan were successively stating their opinions on the information.

“We should utilize this opportunity to shorten the gap with the other families. Their side also has unexpected supernatural power users—— and after all the sacred treasure possessor was taken away by the Grigori.”

“The Shinra side as well, I hear that they have a daughter who possessed a mirror sacred treasure that had the power to contact with devils. It is clear that it is in no way a coincidence that such calamities have befallen the Five Principal Families at once.”

“The magician association——‘Grau Zauberer’, have we been sounded out by them out to form a cooperative relationship in regards to this matter?”

Hearing these few words, the suzerain took out a single piece of paper. ——It was a document written with magical characters. That appeared to be an appeal for cooperation the magician association known as ‘Grau Zauberer’.

Remaining expressionless, the suzerain formed a fire phenomenon in his hand, and in an instant turned the paper the appeal had been written on into ashes.

“——It is not necessary to collude with foreign practitioners. We must display a separation between us and Mephisto Pheles who leads ‘Grau Zauberer’. The same for that Azazel, since he is no more than a swindler.”

Indeed, that was all there was to say.

For the people of the Clan, it was unanimous after all.

“However, there is the matter of ‘Oz’……the world like that from the picture book.”

“……Grigori, Oz, and those who rebelled against the Five Principal Clans keep popping up one after another……”

The members of the clan who couldn’t hide their unrest was not negligible. It was only natural. While they were already aware of the group of fallen angels and the magicians association, to say nothing of the treason of the ‘Utsusemi Agency’, it was truly unexpected that it would turn out that ‘Oz’ was involved in these events. Until now, among those who were part of the Five Principal Clans, none of them had believed such a place had existed. Even among those that had gathered here, there were those that were still in doubt about it.

Even within this the Himejima suzerain——Himejima Suou came to a clear decision.

“No matter what, if such a demonic Rasetsu[44] were to set foot in Honomoto[45] bringing disaster, it is our assigned role to completely eradicate it.”

Everyone quietly nodded their head in accent at this.

——But, letting out a sigh, Himejima Suou said this.

“Truly, the ‘dog’ produced from the genealogy of my elder sister who was exiled from the family……. The matter of the ‘lighting’ was enough, what kind of strange thing had possessed this family?”

It had been some decades earlier that the sister of Suou——Ageha had been exiled from the Clan. Since then, as far as contact with each one went, they had not encountered one another. However, he could not

[44] Could also mean a Rakshasha, a demonic being
[45] Another name for Japan I believe

have guessed that from her lineage such an aberration would be born. Was it something that had been brought into the Himejima bloodline? Or else, could it not be the result of a wish to a heathen god of mischief?

"However, it can't be helped that something like that was produced from the Himejima bloodline. ——Suzaku."

At the suzerain's call, the form of a single individual appeared.

"Yes."

It was a young girl with beautiful long black hair. Her black hair had a glossiness as though it were wet. She possessed a frigid atmosphere, one that was orderly without a hint of hesitation.

Regarding the age of the young girl——Himejima Suzaku, she was seventeen as of this year. Her appearance was fitting given that she was one of the granddaughters of Himejima Suou's other older sister. As of this year, she had been the one talented woman from all of their relatives who had inherited the sacred beast 'Suzaku' that was governed by the Himejima. No, in recent years, the one's who had inherited the sacred beasts of each of the respective Five Principal Clans had been remarkably young. Based on this, the efforts the families had undertaken to bring in good blood, they appeared to have borne fruit.

However, apart from that there was something else that Suou who was the suzerain harbored towards this daughter. That was, she strongly resembled the first one he had raised——Shuri, who had since left them. The mother of Suzaku, she had been Shuri's biological older sister. That Shuri had also been ensnared by that black winged gang, and had lost her life as a result.

The suzerain——Suou had unintentionally thought back upon that. After closing his eyes, he spoke to her——Suzaku.

“I request of you the herald who will become the next head of the Himejima. ——As the representative of the family members who names begin with ‘Red’, can you display the fire dance for us?”[46]

She——Suzaku, gave a deep bow.

I would be honored to, Ooji-sama[47].”

Hearing that one line from Suzaku, Suou calmly nodded. ——But, Suou, narrowing his eyes, lowered his gaze to the floor.

“However. ……Towards the daughter of ‘lightning’ that is aligned with the devils. Towards the ‘dog’ of darkness that is aligned with the black angels……”

He, speaking in a whisper.

“For the time being, we should designate him as ‘The Dog God of the Fallen’."

Four Divine Beasts/Himejima Suzaku

Having been honored by the order from the suzerain at the main shrine, Himejima Suzaku was walking through the grounds.

“Yo.”

Raising a cry, there was a boy in spectacles who appeared to be about the same age as her. Possessing long slender limbs, he was a handsome boy. The strange aura surrounding his body was equivalent to that of Suzaku’s, or perhaps even…….

[46] Many of the Himejima’s first names start with the character for red. This includes Suzaku herself as well as Suou, Ageha, Shuri, and even Akeno. It seems Hanezu was rejected.
[47] granduncle

“What’s your business here, Seiryuu-chan of the Kushihashi family?”

Suzaku inquired as such. The boy——Kushihashi Seiryuu shrugged.

“Inquiring if it will become a three way fight with the gang of fallen angels and the magicians from the picture book.”

Suzaku resumed walking as she spoke.

“Well, I guess it get busy around here. It’s not as though you won’t be working hard as well.”

While following behind her, Seiryuu replied.

“Since that would also be the decision of the family as well, though we will have no other than to comply as well. ……Other than that I had to come flying over when I heard that the Himejima had produced the ‘Dog God’. Amazing isn’t it, that it would be one of the Longinus?”

Suzaku stopped walking and spoke without turning around.

“Isn’t it ironic? That such a dark blade would be born from the Himejima who govern Shintoism?”

Sensing Suzaku’s atmosphere, Seiryuu put on a bitter smile.

“Scary scary.”

Seiryuu changed the topic as he continued.

“Are you aware of even that, Suzaku? That its mere presence would gather the Four Fiends?”

“——The matter of the ‘Four Fiends’ and the ‘Dog God’. The old man-sama of the Himejima, for his part however, has more than had his fury aroused.”

“The Himejima are interesting huh. Coming from here, there’s a high frequency of irregularities. From the misconduct involving the fallen

angel, up to giving birth to the Dog God. And only you are its salvation huh?"

"No, even I was originally from the dark side. It's merely that I could only be pardoned for those days. ——Seiryuu, although it's a sin, can't you summon the other members from the Four Divine Beasts and the Yellow Dragon?"

At these words of Suzaku, Seiryuu smiled cheerfully.

"——That's your move huh? This ought to be fun. However, aside from Genbu-chan and that rambunctious Byakko, are you really going to go as far as to summon Ouryuu? That person is far harder to please than you can guess."

Suzaku gathered together all of her long hair in the back——forming it into a ponytail.

"To make sure, I have to see this personally. Not only the 'Four Fiends, Ikuse Tobio——. For myself, eventually, even that child Tobio, even that matter of the 'lightning, I will have them recognized as part of this family. ——I will accept even the family's darkness."

The <<Dog>> and the 'Four Fiends', as well as the 'Four Divine Beasts' and the 'Yellow Dragon', they were each about to meet the other——.

Dog God of the Fallen -SLASHDØG- End